



Humor: Lightening the Load of Selected Single Female Breadwinners

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ABSTRACT

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In Bowen's Family Systems Theory, the family is viewed as an organism. Since a change in one part results in changes in others, the individual's functioning must be considered in the context of relationships. Research has identified humor among family strengths that enhance resilience. As humor is beneficial in stress management and interpersonal relationships, it is essential in handling pressures, especially for breadwinners who provide for their families. In the Philippines, breadwinners are often male and married, but some single females assume the breadwinner role. These women face financial and societal pressures since the traditional family cycle devalues singlehood as an alternative life choice. Many studies focus on humor, breadwinners, or singlehood, but little is known about how single female breadwinners use humor to cope. Thus, this descriptive phenomenological study leads to greater depth in understanding the experiences of single female breadwinners. Seven were recruited by purposive sampling. A family member of each breadwinner also validated the breadwinner's use of humor. Semi-structured interviews were used to gather data that were subjected to thematic analysis. Based on the breadwinners' stories, five themes emerged: Hurdling Family Crisis, Uniting Family Members, Managing Pressures, Overcoming Social Norms and Recognizing Influences and Opportunities. Findings highlight how humor lightens the breadwinners' load. The use of humor influences their thoughts, feelings and actions which affect family dynamics positively. This study fosters recognition and support for single persons integral to families.

KEYWORDS:

Bowen's Family Systems Theory, family dynamics, stress management, relationships

1. INTRODUCTION

Humor is "a social behavior and is seen as the ability of individuals, circumstances, or objects to elicit enjoyment or laughter from other people" (Fox, 2016, p. 67). Famous theorists like Alfred Adler and Sigmund Freud believed in humor as an aid in healing and in overcoming unpleasant situations (Fox, 2016), while Gordon Allport associated humor with a mature and healthy personality (Gladding & Drake Wallace, 2016). With humor recognized in research as beneficial in stress management and interpersonal relationships, it is vital to shed light on its use in contemporary society. Many Filipinos use humor to cope. Yet the load may be heavier for a single female who is also the breadwinner, the main provider in a family. Breadwinners deal with challenges from economic downturns.

They experience physical and mental fatigue. Parry and Segalo (2017) used the image of "eating burnt toast" to symbolize these self-sacrificing women.

Singles are viewed as incomplete and in purgatory until they find their mates (Jalili, 2018). They endure the conflicts of existing beyond the mainstream of culturally encouraged identities (Maeda & Hecht, 2012). Budgeon (2016) noted a sense of failure across narratives of single women. These concerns are evident in the results of qualitative research utilizing thematic analysis. Such studies articulate the lived experiences of single women. Pickens and Braun (2018) affirmed pressures arising from societal expectations in a study of 21 single women aged 25 to 35 in New Zealand. Women may be lauded for their achievements as models of new femininity, yet they are expected to marry and conform to the traditional femininity model. However, Reyes-Laureano (2012) noted that although single women are hindered by prejudice and stereotyping, they undergo a transition that leads to enhanced well-being. The acceptance of 10 Filipino single women aged 35 to 61 of their voluntary or involuntary singleness made them happier and more fulfilled. This was further emphasized in the research of

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Hoosen Carrim (2016) on seven Indian single women aged 33 to 46 in South Africa who also bear the burden of being breadwinners. This change in status upsets the family structure since it departs from the patriarchal model. However, relatives recognize their authority when it comes to personal decision-making. These women develop a sense of agency and assume greater control over their lives.

Like these Indian single women, Filipino single female breadwinners belong to families that they need to support to survive. Many studies focus on humor, breadwinners, or singlehood, but little is known about how single female breadwinners use humor to cope. The Bowen Center for the Study of the Family (2026) explains that in Bowen’s Family Systems Theory, the family is perceived as an organism. The changes in one family member affects others.

As such, when a single female breadwinner uses humor, this has an impact on her family. Lietz et al. (2016) identified humor as among the family strengths that fortify a family’s resilience. The research of Escarices and Jimenez (2017) showed that the support of family members is crucial in the life satisfaction of single women.

This study explored the experiences of female single breadwinners, particularly in the use of humor. It sought to answer five research questions: What are the experiences of single female breadwinners? How do single female breadwinners define humor? What are the varied situations and contexts in which female breadwinners use humor? How do single female breadwinners overcome challenges with the use of humor? How does the breadwinner role influence the single females’ use of humor?

2. METHODOLOGY

Research Design. In examining and understanding the experiences of selected single female breadwinners in the use of humor, the study deals with words, statements and meanings. Thus, the qualitative research method of descriptive phenomenology is deemed appropriate. Amedei Giorgi (2012) developed descriptive phenomenology as a version of Husserl’s method. Husserl’s philosophical foundation for phenomenology is a belief that although individuals possess the potential to influence the environment, this experience may or may not be different for each person. In phenomenology, the researcher describes a phenomenon as experienced by the participants, but without considering causal explanations. As Harazni and Alkaissi (2016, p.2) stated, this design is about “the lived experience of the people by describing the aspect of the experience by focusing on what exists. This design does not focus on the interpretation for the experience but it will be an indicator of people’s thoughts and feelings.”

Participants. For the inclusion criteria, each participant must be a never-married, single female; 18 years and older; and active in the use of humor, whether verbal or written. The use of humor must be validated by other people, confirming

public perception. Each participant must be living with her family and breadwinning for at least two years. Seven breadwinners, with one family member for each to validate the breadwinners’ use of humor, were selected. The tables below present the profiles of the breadwinners and their family members. To protect their identities, pseudonyms were used.

Table 1. Profile of Breadwinners

Name	Age	Profession	Dependents
Anya	38	Architect	3
Berna	34	High School Teacher	3
Cara	28	Account Manager	5
Demi	28	High School Teacher	2
Eva	42	Information Systems Associate	2
Faye	28	High School Teacher	5
Gem	55	College Professor	1

Table 2. Profile of Family Members

Name	Age	Profession
Adora	66	Retiree
Ben	17	Student
Cleo	21	Assistant Manager
Donna	60	Retiree
Elena	69	Retiree
Flor	22	Student
Gia	57	Entrepreneur

Data Collection. The researcher sought recommendations from friends and relatives for names of possible participants. A total of 14 participants were invited to join the study via e-mail or Facebook Messenger. The invitation contained the aim and procedures of the study. It also indicated that participation was voluntary and the interviews will be recorded. All participants, after accepting invitations, signed and submitted informed consent forms. They were assured of confidentiality and provided anonymity with the changing of their names. During the semi-structured interviews, they were free to refrain from answering any uncomfortable questions.

Data Analysis. The data analysis was guided by the steps Giorgi (2012) outlined to carry out research. First, the researcher reads the transcript in its entirety with the attitude of phenomenological reduction. This means not considering the object or state of affairs as existing, but rather only that it is present to the consciousness. Second, the researcher rereads the transcript from the beginning, and constitutes parts called meaning units. This is done by marking

transitions in meaning. Third, in the “heart of the method,” the researcher turns the data into descriptive expressions that indicate the import of the participant’s statements. This makes the value explicit for the phenomenon being studied. Fourth, the researcher reviews psychologically more sensitive expressions and writes a basic structure of the experience with “free imaginative variation,” which helps understand the essential insight. In the fifth and last step, the researcher clarifies and interprets the data with this basic structure.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Five themes emerged from the stories shared by the breadwinners and their family members. Humor, generally viewed as used for entertainment, serves many purposes in the families. Breadwinners not only use humor to amuse. They also apply it to handle crises, strengthen bonds, ease pressures and face expectations. Moreover, being aware of humor’s benefits, they use it intentionally. They find opportunities to insert it in their everyday lives.

3.1 Theme 1: Hurdling Family Crisis. For the breadwinners, the use of humor is necessary. It lowers tension and helps the family survive crises like financial difficulties or conflict among members. Berna says, *I don’t really want to confront people. I would tell them ‘What’s this? Too much electricity consumption, pay the bill.’ It’s like a hint but it’s something I wanted to tell them but I can’t say it seriously so it relieves the burden since I can say it in a fun way.* Cara recalls, *There’s my sibling who’s so mad so I said ‘Kill each other.’ The tension was cut, the negative energy was cut. She’s like ‘You’re too much. I won’t kill her.’ I said, ‘It’s only a joke since you’re cursing, be calm, postpone (your anger) to tomorrow.’* The absence of tension may be essential for any group to succeed, but more so for family members who must cooperate to achieve a common goal. For the single females, the breadwinner role influences their use of humor, which they practice with sensitivity. In certain situations, they also avoid using humor since money is a delicate topic. They do not want to hurt their relatives’ feelings and make them feel like a burden.

3.2 Theme 2: Uniting Family Members. Humor is vital to the breadwinners and their family members because it brings joy and strengthens bonds. It also relieves fatigue and makes lives brighter. Eva says, *If you’re all too serious in one family, life would be so boring.... Even if you have people around you who are serious, you have to find something that can change the atmosphere so I think that’s humor. It helps brighten the atmosphere at home or outside with your friends, relatives.* Families use humor during meal times and gatherings and in their daily routines. Demi states, *Humor lightens our mood, like our day is incomplete if we don’t tease one another... I feel humor really builds up a family.* However, although the breadwinners regularly use face-to-face humor, they also engage in digital humor with their

family members. Technology allows them to connect even while busy doing different tasks in the same house or when they are far from one another.

3.3 Theme 3: Managing Pressures. Humor is a stress reliever that makes oneself and others feel better. The words “light” “bright” and “lighten” recur throughout the breadwinners’ definitions of humor. In terms of purpose, humor illuminates internally, referring to one’s mind or perspective. Externally, it does the same to a problem, a situation or one’s home. Despite hardships, the single females find fulfillment in breadwinning. The sacrifices are worth it. They experience happiness and satisfaction in giving to their families. Faye states, *Fruit of my labor in terms of my sisters’ education. It helps them in life eventually since education is a requirement, that part feels good. I helped to lift not only my life but their lives too.* The breadwinners overcome challenges by using humor. It cultivates a positive outlook which lightens the burden. Anya says, *I use humor to ease the pressure...It somehow helps me to be less, less problematic. Once you’re filled with like good vibes, somehow you find ways to somehow actually solve issues that it’s easier for you to actually cope with the situation.*

3.4 Theme 4: Overcoming Social Norms. In the Philippines, singlehood is typically viewed as a temporary stage before married life. Although the breadwinners use humor during family gatherings and work situations, they use it often when they get teased about singlehood. Others comment on the breadwinners’ lack of a spouse or partner and their marriage and childbearing plans. Gem is used to it and chooses to respond with humor. She says, *One colleague greeted me ‘Happy birthday’ then she asked ‘Are you happy being single?’ ...The way she asked me seemed sarcastic, she’s married... so I said ‘Generally, yes. Are you?’* The breadwinners have realistic and practical views about love and marriage. Since they provide for their parents and siblings, they have experienced the hardships of raising a family. They use humor to deflect attention and questions. Eva states, *Maybe you know someone, that’s okay with me. It’s like that or there was one time I asked someone, a wedding coordinator, I told her ‘Maybe you have a package with a husband included, that would be okay.’* Humor also leads to acceptance. Cara states, *I joke about it a lot since I believe in manifestation to attract it, so sometimes like ‘Where is my boyfriend? It’s taking long,’ like eventually hopefully like you find someone I just manifest to the universe. If it happens, it happens.* It is also easier for them to overcome norms when their families support them, assuring that it is okay to be single.

3.5 Theme 5: Recognizing Influences and Opportunities. The breadwinners’ use of humor is not necessarily influenced by family members. They learn to use humor by observing funny people in their environments. Faye absorbed her father’s humor, not only verbally but by using nonverbal gestures. She says, *My father loved to use humor.... When my*

mother would get mad, he would tease her, even dance. Cara, on other hand, has a serious widowed mother and learned to use humor in school. She says, *It was the environment that influenced me to be funny. I guess my classmates are kind of very happy people. I made friends with happy people so I probably brought it home.* Being aware of humor's benefits, the breadwinners also use it intentionally, at home and beyond it. Gem recalls, *I saw the staffer greeting all the customers 'Thank you' with a poker face. When it was my turn, I told him 'Merry Christmas!' even if it was not Christmas.*

These themes show that humor indeed affects family dynamics. In Bowen's Family Systems Theory, the family is viewed as an organism, with properties greater than the sum of its parts (The Bowen Center for the Study of the Family, 2026). Since a change in one part results in changes in others, the individual's functioning must be considered in the context of relationships. The family is an emotional unit, in which each member's thoughts, feelings and actions have an effect on others. Among the eight processes inherent in the theory, four are reflected in this study.

3.6 Differentiation of Self. The single female breadwinners may be considered differentiated. They remain connected to others yet they exhibit independent thinking (Brown & Errington, 2024). To illustrate, breadwinners hold positions of power in their families since they are the main providers. They make decisions that affect the family, like the choice of the house that they will rent or the schools that their siblings will attend. However, there is a duality in the concept of freedom as the single females described in their stories. They lack the freedom to spend as much as they want on personal needs. But then they also enjoy the freedom of singlehood and financial independence.

Yet they are single females still living with their parents. True to Filipino culture, they respect and defer to their parents' authority. They consult them in decision-making. Despite being the breadwinners, they use humor that makes their relatives feel comfortable and valued. Humor becomes a leveler. Although they take charge, they do not come across as imposing figures who intimidate. Thus, they enjoy a good relationship with their parents and siblings.

3.7 Triangles. A triangle occurs in a family during a conflict when a third party takes a side and redirects the conflict (Brown & Errington, 2024). The breadwinners who use humor to reduce tension in their families fill this role. Humor necessitates sensitivity. They mediate in disagreements that occur between their parents, among their siblings or between a parent and a sibling. The breadwinners' humor prevents conflicts from further escalating. Consequently, they keep their families intact.

3.8 Emotional cut-off. When the breadwinners use humor with their families, they strengthen their bonds and prevent emotional cut-off. Since humor is social, they do not distance

themselves from relatives. On the contrary, they spice up conversations to make gatherings fun for all. Being single and female, they could be the butt of jokes but instead of reacting with anger, they respond with funny quips. Humor becomes a safety valve. It saves relationships among family members from ruin, since insensitive jokes could cause one to distance.

3.9 Sibling Position. Among the seven breadwinners, Anya, Berna, Cara and Eva are the eldest children in their families. Their sibling position enables them to take the leadership role while younger siblings become dependent on them and surrender decision-making (Brown & Errington, 2024). On the other hand, the three other breadwinners, Demi, Faye and Gem may be the younger siblings in their families, with each being the second child. However, they may be considered the "functional eldest." When their elder siblings got married, left home and had to provide for their own families, they had to assume the breadwinning responsibility. In carrying that heavy load, the use of humor by both these natural eldest and "functional eldest" children lightens their burdens.

This study shows how humor influences the breadwinners' thoughts, feelings and actions which affect family dynamics positively. It fosters recognition and support for these single persons integral to families.

4. LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

This study has several limitations. First, the findings could not be generalized to apply to a bigger population. Seven families, with one breadwinner and a family member in each to validate the breadwinner's use of humor, joined this study through purposive sampling. However, even with a total of 14 participants, this may be considered a small sample. Second, the breadwinners varied greatly in age and family configurations, which may have affected the quality of the data. The experiences and use of humor by a breadwinner in her 20s may be too different from those of one in her 40s. This concern is also the same for a breadwinner still living with both parents and one in a home with only a single parent. Financial challenges and emotional demands might be heavier for any of them. Finally, the topic of the research may have inflated the participants' perception of the use of humor. Breadwinning is typically viewed as a burden so the tendency may have been to report only instances of humor that are uplifting.

5. IMPLICATIONS

For Family Studies. In the context of the processes in Bowen's Family Systems theory, the breadwinners' use of humor helps maintain their families' well-being. More than being providers, they also mediate, comfort and entertain.

For Studies on Philippine Culture. This study could serve as a starting point for more in-depth studies on how culture influences single females' attitudes toward breadwinning. Filial love is vital in Filipino culture and

children are expected to take care of their parents as an expression of gratitude (Tee-Melegrito, 2024).

For Counselors. Since this study provides information about single female breadwinners, this will help counselors guide them better. Counselors need to recognize that such women are just as important as any family member, and they would benefit from support.

For Employers. Companies could evaluate their systems of benefits and incentives. They must ensure that distribution is fair and equal. Married employees often get more than singles. However, single people, especially breadwinners, also have the same financial needs.

6. RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

To address the limitations of this study, a bigger sample of participants from similar ages and family configurations could be used instead. Although further research on the use of humor by single breadwinners would be interesting, other factors could be included to reduce the tendency for positive reports.

Social expectations in the Philippines also differ for single men and single women. Research on the use of humor by single male breadwinners might yield fascinating results. One point of interest might be the kind of questions and ribbing that they get for being single, and how they respond to it. Another would be how they respond to family challenges and conflicts.

Most of all, more studies could be done on single men and women. They are members of families yet they are overlooked in family studies. Research databases only show few studies about singlehood in the context of the family. Therefore, additional research would expand knowledge on this particular group.

7. DECLARATION OF NON-COMPLIANCE

The authors express no conflict of interest regarding the authorship, research and publication of this study.

8. ETHICAL APPROVAL

The Research and Ethics Committee of Miriam College approved this study prior to the data collection.

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