

What Married Women Want

Sociologist Brad Wilcox says one type of marriage makes most women happier.

Interview by Stan Guthrie | posted 11/13/2006 09:10AM

Sociologists Steven L. Nock and W. Bradford Wilcox of the University of Virginia have presented a new study ("What's Love Got to Do with It? Equality, Equity, Commitment, and Women's Marital Quality," available in digital form from *Amazon.com*) based on the findings of the National Survey of Families and Households. Stan Guthrie, a CT senior associate editor, interviewed Wilcox, who last spoke with this magazine about his book *Soft Patriarchs, New Men: How Christianity Shapes Fathers and Husbands* (University of Chicago Press, 2004).

What prompted this line of study?

My book suggested that men who were churchgoers with a strong, normative commitment to marriage were better husbands and were more likely, it seemed to me, to make their wives happy. They were more likely to spend quality time with their wives and more likely to express affection to their wives. I really wanted to test some academic theories that suggest that more egalitarian marriages are happier than more complementarian marriages.

Why did you choose to look at happiness?

About two-thirds of all divorces in the United States are, at least officially, initiated by women. One of the key factors [they cite] is the emotional quality of their relationships. In other words, if they feel that their marriages are high-quality relationships, they're not likely to seek divorce. If they feel otherwise, however, women are much more likely to head for divorce. One of the implicit concerns of this study was to figure out in what kind of context women are most likely to be happy and then are, of course, indirectly, less likely to divorce.

How do evangelical women fare in all this?

Based on my earlier research, evangelical women tend to be happier in their marriages than other women, particularly when both the wife and the husband attend church on a regular basis. This idea that Christians are just as likely to divorce as secular folks is not correct if we factor church attendance into our thinking. Churchgoing evangelical Protestants, churchgoing Catholics, and churchgoing mainline Protestants are all significantly less likely to divorce.

How much less likely?

I estimate between 35 and 50 percent less likely than Americans who attend church just nominally, just once or twice a year, or who don't attend church at all. It is true that people who say they've had a born-again experience are about as likely to divorce as people who are completely secular. But if you look at this through the lens of church attendance, you see a very different story.

What makes married women happy?

The biggest predictor of women's happiness is their husband's emotional engagement. The extent to which he is affectionate, to which he is empathetic, to which he is basically tuned into his wife, this is the most important factor in predicting the wife's happiness. This basically drowns out every other factor in our models.

Is that a surprise?

I don't think it is. But from an academic perspective, a lot of work has focused on, for instance, who does the housework and how that's related to people's perceptions of happiness in their marriages or fairness or whatnot. We have to recognize that for the average American marriage, it matters a lot more whether the husband is emotionally in tune with his wife than whether he's doing, say, half the dishes or half the laundry. If the wife had to choose between having a husband who is taking half the housework and having a husband who is really making a conscious, deliberate effort to focus emotionally on his wife, the emotional focus is much more likely to be a paramount concern.

What are some other key predictors?

Women who have more traditional gender attitudes are significantly happier in their marriages. They're more likely to embrace the idea that men should take the primary lead in breadwinning and women should take the primary lead in nurturing the children and managing the domestic sphere, managing family life.

Considering the social changes in the last 40 or 50 years, what percentage of women still hold those traditional views?

It's around 35 percent in the population at large. But it's not just a question of who works inside or outside the home. What's more predictive of a woman's happiness is whether or not her husband is the primary breadwinner. The income actually is a more important predictor of her happiness than whether she works outside the home. Having a husband who earns the lion's share of the income makes the average woman happier in her marriage. If the husband earns more than 66 percent of the income, the wife is more likely to report that she's happy with her marriage, and she's also more likely to report that she spends quality time with her husband.

My theory is that women are looking for, in general, husbands who provide them with emotional and financial support, and support to make the choices that they think are important for them and for their children. Women who have husbands who are good breadwinners have the freedom to decide what they want to do, whether that's to stay home with their kids, whether that's to work part time, or whether that's to pursue work that might be more meaningful but not particularly remunerative. Having a husband who is a good breadwinner gives a woman more options. It's not necessarily all about traditional roles, per se. It's about having the financial security as a wife and maybe mother to act in ways that you think are best for you and for your family.

What are some other factors?

Spouses who share weekly [church] attendance had happier wives. Spouses who share a strong, normative commitment to marriage--that is, who are opposed to easy divorce, who believe the kids should be reared in married households--have wives who are markedly happier. This factor is as strong as who works outside the home or who earns the lion's share of the income. It's also extremely important that the wife considers the division of housework to be fair to her. A sense of equity is extremely important, but equity is not equality. Women want things to be fair in their homes, but they don't equate fairness with equality.

What does your research say, if anything, about the egalitarian and complementarian argument in evangelical churches?

I don't have any access to data that would look specifically at people's attitudes towards headship and the quality or stability of their marriages. But this study certainly does suggest that when it comes to different emphases in the family, the complementarian side seems to be, shall we say, more in touch with how the average American married couple experiences family life. I reran all of my analyses with a sub-sample of women who had more egalitarian attitudes. Even for these women, they're more likely to be happy when their husbands earn the lion's share of income, when they share religious attendance with their husbands, when they share a strong, normative commitment to marriage with their husbands, and when they don't work outside the home.

What's ahead for marriage in the future?

I think we're going to see a continued growth of more egalitarian marriages in a large subset of the population. But we're going to also continue to see what I call a neo-traditional model of family life. What I mean by neo-traditional is that it's progressive in a sense that men, particularly religious men, are investing more and more--especially in the emotional arena--in their wives and children. But it's traditional in that there's still some kind of effort to, in a sense, mark off who is the primary breadwinner and who is the primary nurturer. That may mean that both the husband and wife are working in the outside labor force, but there's still some effort to give the lead for breadwinning to the husband and the lead for nurturing to the wife. This kind of neo-traditional family model is here to stay. I think that prediction is somewhat at odds with what many of my colleagues in the academy would predict.

We have to think more seriously about family pluralism in the U.S. There are different models of family life in the United States, from single-parent families to more egalitarian married families to more neo-traditional married families. The first two tend to get most of the focus in the media. The third group gets less attention, but it makes

up about a third of all families in the United States or more, depending upon how you describe neo-traditional. So they're an important group. And what this research suggests is that the marriages in this neo-traditional group are happier and probably also more stable than the other forms of families in the U.S.

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Here are Wilcox and Steven L. Nock's findings: "What's Love Got to Do with It? Equality, Equity, Commitment, and Women's Marital Quality." And www.happiestwives.org is a website about the study.

Here is [his page](#) at the University of Virginia sociology department.

Slate has some more on this same study, focusing on the [fate of feminists](#) in view of Wilcox and Nock's findings.

PBS interviewed Wilcox on family and parenting

Douglas LeBlanc interviewed Wilcox for CT about his book, *Soft Patriarchs, New Men: How Christianity Shapes Fathers and Husbands*

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