

What Makes Wives Happy?

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March 1, 2006 -- What do wives really want? A new study shows that for the typical American woman a happy marriage combines both modern and traditional ideas of partnership.

In a survey of 5,000 married women, wives who felt that their husbands were emotionally engaged were the happiest in their marriages. But wives who worked outside the home were not as happy as wives who didn't.

Far more than financial status or equal division of household chores, the single most important predictor of marital happiness among the women in the study was the level of their husbands' emotional engagement. Wives who shared the view that marriage is a lifelong commitment with their husbands were also happiest in their relationships.

A more controversial finding was that women in the survey were happiest when their husbands were the main breadwinners for the family and when they did not work outside the home.

Study co-author W. Bradford Wilcox, PhD, tells WebMD that this was true even for women who considered themselves progressive when it came to marriage roles.

"Women who worked outside the home were able to spend less quality time with their husbands and that could certainly influence their perception of marital happiness," he says.

He added that women who believe in the modern egalitarian idea of marriage may still find juggling a career, children, and a marriage to be tremendously stressful. Three-quarters of the women in the study had preschool aged or school-aged children.

"I think the message here is that elements of the new and the old combine to form a happy marriage for women," he says. "The new is that men have to really step up emotionally in their marriages. At the same time, we find that wives appreciate some aspects of the old model, such as having a husband who is a good breadwinner."

Traditional Roles

Wilcox is a sociologist at the University of Virginia whose research focuses on "the influence of religious belief and practice on marriage, co-habitation, parenting, and fatherhood," according to his university biography.

He has written extensively on the importance of the traditional mother-father family model for the welfare of children.

University of Virginia colleague and study co-author Steven L. Nock, PhD, tells WebMD that he is less of a traditionalist than Wilcox when it comes to views on marriage and family. He says his views may also differ regarding what the new findings mean.

Although the study attempted to control for family income, Nock says he believes the vast majority of the working women in the study had jobs outside the home because they felt they had to for economic reasons.

He says working is becoming less of an option for many married women, and more of an economic necessity.

"The average married couple's income in the U.S. is still less than \$60,000, and that is for couples where both partners work," he says. "If everyone is working more than they want to it isn't surprising that marriages may be affected."

Equal Partners

Psychologist and couple's therapist Peter Larson, PhD, says a sense of equality within the marriage is a critical predictor of happiness, regardless of whether the participants adopt gender roles perceived as traditional or nontraditional.

Larsen says in a study of the 5,000 happiest and 5,000 unhappiest couples from a 20,000 couple dataset, he and colleagues found that four of five couples who perceived themselves as equal partners within the marriage considered their marriages happy.

Only one of five couples who considered their marriages traditional, meaning that the husband tended to make decisions unilaterally, had happy marriages.

This was the case regardless of whether the women worked outside the home or not.

Larson notes that his own marriage might be viewed as traditional -- when it is anything but -- because his wife is a stay-at-home mom to their three small children.

"She has a master's degree in psychology and worked to put me through grad school, and we make decisions together," he says. "It looks traditional from the outside, but we treat each other with equality. That is the key."

SOURCES: Wilcox, W.B. *Social Forces*, March, 2006; vol. 84, pp. 1321-1345. W. Bradford Wilcox, PhD, assistant professor of sociology, University of Virginia. Steven L. Nock, PhD, sociologist, University of Virginia. Peter Larson, PhD, director, Programs and Outreach for Life Innovations, international headquarters of the PREPARE/ENRICH Inventories.

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