

## Commitment to marriage, emotional engagement key to wives' happiness

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A study by University of Virginia sociologists W. Bradford Wilcox and Steven L. Nock finds that the single most important factor in women's marital happiness is the level of their husbands' emotional engagement -- not money, the division of household chores or other factors.

The study also finds that women whose husbands earn the lion's share of income, who don't work outside the home, or who share a strong commitment to lifelong marriage with their husbands report the highest levels of marital happiness -- in sharp contrast to academic conventional wisdom, according to the authors. In addition, perceptions of fairness matter for married women. Women who report that the division of housework is fair are happier in their marriages than women who think that their husbands don't do their fair share.

"Regardless of what married women say they believe about gender, they tend to have happier marriages when their husband is a good provider -- provided that he is also emotionally engaged," Wilcox said. "I was very surprised to find that even egalitarian-minded women are happier when their marriages are organized along more gendered lines."

The study, "What's Love Got to do With It? Equality, Equity, Commitment and Women's Marital Quality," appears in the March issue of *Social Forces*, one of the country's most highly regarded journals of sociology. It draws on the National Survey of Families and Households, which sampled more than 5,000 couples around the United States.

The most important determinant of women's marital happiness is the emotional engagement of their husbands. Most research on American marriages has focused on the division of housework and paid work -- who does what inside and outside the home. The new study, by contrast, shows wives care most about how affectionate and understanding their husbands are, and how much quality time they spend with their husbands.

Wilcox and Nock found that women are happiest in their marriages when their husbands earn 68 percent or more of the couple's income. Likewise, women who do not work outside the home report happier marriages, and spend more quality time with their husbands. Finally, women who have more traditional attitudes -- who believe, for instance, that women should take the lead in taking care of the home and family, and that men should take the lead in earning -- are happier in their marriages, report more affection and understanding from their husbands, and spend more quality time with their husbands.

Commitment also matters. Women who share with their husbands a strong commitment to lifelong marriage -- who, for instance, think that marriage is a "lifetime relationship and should never be ended except under extreme circumstances" -- are much more likely to report that they are happy in their marriages, and that they are happy with the affection and understanding they receive from their husbands, compared to women who do not have such a commitment to marriage. Shared commitment seems to generate mutual trust and higher levels of emotional investment on the part of husbands -- both factors which promote marital happiness among women.

Fairness does matter in shaping the quality and character of women's marriages. Married women are happier in their marriages when they think housework is divided fairly and they perceive their marriage to be equitable. They also spend more quality time with their husbands when

they think housework is divided fairly. But their perceptions of fairness in this area are not consistently related to a 50-50 division of housework. Almost two-thirds of married women report that they are happy with the division of housework; but most of these women also do the majority of chores around the home. Either because they have a traditional mindset or because they think their husband is making important contributions as a provider or as a father, they view an unequal division of chores around the home as fair.

"Conventional and academic wisdom now suggests that the 'best' marriages are unions of equals," Nock said. "Our work suggests that the reality is more complicated. Wives are surely sensitive to imbalances in routine tasks and efforts, as almost all research shows. However, we find that they are more concerned with their husband's investments in the emotional content of the marriage. We interpret our results to suggest that partners need to pay more attention to how their partners feel about their relationship and about marriage generally because equality does not necessarily produce equity."

Source: University of Virginia

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