
“The Forum”

The Forum Mailbox

Karen A. Cerulo, Editor in Chief

The premiere of “The Forum,” our journal’s new center of essay and debate, generated much discussion among our readers. Issue 1 focused on marital happiness, with authors W. Bradford Wilcox, Steven Nock, and Kristen Springer exchanging their views. Wilcox and Nock argued that wives’ marital happiness is closely linked to spouses’ shared commitment to a lifelong marriage. They also argued that wives are happiest in marriages based on the “husband as breadwinner” model. Kristen Springer disagreed with Wilcox and Nock’s interpretation of the data. She felt that the authors’ conclusions were at odds with many of the stronger trends in the data—trends suggesting that husbands’ contributions to household labor or husbands’ emotion work are far stronger predictors of marital happiness.

Some readers felt that Wilcox and Nock were onto something interesting—something meriting more extensive consideration.

According to Wilcox and Nock, women are happiest if their husbands are loving and both spouses are strongly committed to lifelong marriage. No surprise there. Beyond that, the authors assert that women tend to be happier in “gender model” marriages—those in which husbands “take the lead in bread winning and wives take the lead in homemaking and childcare.”

The interesting question is why this is so. The authors suggest “gender socialization”—that both men and women are “socialized” to “value” asymmetry of roles over strict equality. They claim these values determine satisfaction even in women who express egalitarian views. I believe that the real explanation is more complicated.

First, women with strong egalitarian preferences confront a mismatch. There are probably more women who want a truly companionate marriage than men. Thus, many equality-preferring women—including those in relationships that register as companionate—probably end up marrying men who don’t quite share their preferences. Second, as I have argued in my 1998 article “Bargaining in the Shadow of the Market: Is There a Future for Egalitarian Marriage?”, (84 Va. L. Rev. 509), men’s longer reproductive life, combined with their better extra-marital options and lesser interest in the domestic, gives them more marital bargaining power. This means that most equality-preferring wives—even those in companionate relationships—must

exert constant pressure to get husbands to do their full domestic share, and their husbands will still more often get their way. Finally, a companionate marriage is, by definition, almost always one in which two people share at least three demanding jobs—two full time positions outside the home, plus one full-time position of running the house. (In contrast, gendered marriages, in which women usually work part-time if at all, clock in at closer to two.) The situation is even worse for professionals or managers, where “full-time” jobs are much more than that, and parenting has reached new levels of intensity. Under these conditions, the two-career egalitarian marriage is a truly heroic act. (It should be noted, however, that full-time working wives who do most of the housework—the more common pattern—are beyond heroic!)

Given these realities, companionate married life is hardly a formula for women’s happiness, and most egalitarian women are probably doomed to some degree of marital disappointment. So much for the feminist revolution—the internal marital dynamics of power, plus the ineluctable demands of work and home, stand as formidable obstacles to the realization of truly egalitarian marriage, save for the lucky few. But this does not necessarily doom marriage. As Catherine Hakim has argued, and as Wilcox and Nock suggest, most women are temperamentally unsuited to the feminist ideal. Call this “values” or, with Hakim, call it preferences: Most women do not want strict equality of roles. This is probably just as well, as men who willingly embrace companionate living are very hard to find. Anyway, few men or women in their right mind will long endure what egalitarian marriage entails in the modern world. It’s just too frantic. Although gender justice takes a hit, the possibility of marital happiness will, for now, have to stand as the consolation prize.

Amy L. Wax

Robert Mundheim Professor of Law, University of Pennsylvania Law School

Others felt that scholars on both sides of the issue could be overstating their claims.

Like the blind men and the elephant, each of these authors is correct in their own way. Much of the problem stems from the failure of sociologists to give accurate estimates of effect size in their results and conclusions. Springer is correct that the effect sizes for most of the findings about marital commitment and husband’s breadwinning are quite modest and likely to be substantively trivial although statistically significant. The big news is the impact of husband’s emotional availability and appreciation, which dwarfs all other findings, as Wilcox and Nock duly note. They briefly discuss the antecedents of husbands’ emotional support, and find that perceived equity in housework is a contributor to this sense of emotional support, as well as an important determinant of marital happiness in its own right. Here the real argument begins. Since perceived equity is only loosely related to actual equality in housework and child care, Wilcox and Nock believe that the quasi-egalitarian family where husbands take the lead in breadwinning probably maximizes marital happiness. Springer falsely equates perceived equity with actual equality, and believes that the companionate sharing marriage probably maximizes marital happiness. Fortunately we have a long history of research on the determinants of perceived equity in relationships using the same data, the NSFH. Mary Clare Lennon’s work showed that women were indeed claiming that relationships were equitable when women performed more housework and child care—the low expectations and “rosy view” of their husband’s contributions that Wilcox and Nock write about in their work. However she and others also note that husbands’ actual contributions to housework and child care were the most important

determinants of perceived equity in relationships, supporting Springer's point. Nock and Wilcox's work begs for a path analysis in which the total impact of paid and unpaid work hours on wives' marital happiness could be determined, not just direct effects.

I am not surprised that women report the most marital satisfaction when their marriages reflect the current reality for couples living in the U.S. Husbands have better earnings opportunities than their wives, and wives' get little support from employers for pregnancy and child care. So most marriages are quasi-egalitarian at best and husbands generally take the lead in breadwinning. Egalitarian marriages are not well supported by existing institutional arrangements, so achieving such a relationship is difficult. Moreover, marriages in which wives contribute more of the family income than husbands are not necessarily egalitarian—they are disproportionately marriages in which husbands have significant earnings impediments. Not the swiftest route to marital happiness, for sure.

Jennifer Glass
University of Iowa

But most of those who wrote us expressed clear support for one argument over the other. Some found the Wilcox and Nock argument compelling and felt that, at some level, Springer's critique forwarded faulty conclusions and unfairly stereotyped the authors. For example:

Springer's interpretation of Wilcox and Nock (2006) is compelling. As she notes, the central messages of their statistical analysis are that wives report higher marital quality when their husbands are loving and that husbands are more loving when wives are content with the domestic division of labor. Therefore, although I like Springer's short-hand "Loving Husbands = Happy Wives," I suggest a longer but more informative summary: When couples are not in conflict over the division of household labor, husbands are especially loving, and that loving behavior increases wives' reported marital quality.

Nevertheless, I disagree with Springer's conclusion that, "increases in husbands' share of household labor will lead to an improvement in wives' marital happiness" (page 113). On the contrary, Wilcox and Nock find that wives report higher marital quality when they consider the division of labor fair. Furthermore, they find some evidence that wives report lower marital quality when husbands do more housework.

Consequently, I am happy that Wilcox and Nock highlight the connection between higher marital quality and a traditional division of labor. This connection hints at an important issue that they largely overlook. As the desire for gender egalitarianism in the United States has increased, structural supports for it have lagged far behind. If wives report higher marital quality when they and their spouses emulate the male breadwinner/female homemaker model, it may not be because wives (or husbands) prefer such arrangements. Other analyses of the NSFH suggest they do not prefer them.¹ Rather, a traditional division of labor (even if unwanted) may increase marital quality because it reduces spousal conflict, work-life conflict, child-care problems, and other issues that arise when men or women buck

¹ Clarkberg, Marin, and Phyllis Moen. 2001. "Understanding the Time-Squeeze: Married Couples Preferred and Actual Work-Hour Strategies," *American Behavioral Scientist* 44: 1115–1136.

the system of domesticity.² Changing gender norms do not threaten marital quality; stagnant social structures do.

Jeremy Reynolds
University of Georgia

Another said:

Kristen Springer attributes several conclusions and value judgments to Wilcox and Nock that I cannot find after several careful readings of those authors' article. For instance, Springer says that Wilcox and Nock claim that women are too critical of their husbands. I do not find any judgment at all about women being "too critical," only some reasonable speculation about how women's tendency to be or not to be critical under different circumstances may affect their marital happiness. In several other places Springer reads value judgments and "suggestions" (on the part of Wilcox and Nock) into what seems to me to be straightforward and non-judgmental consideration of possible or probable causal relationships. Springer devotes an entire section to the thesis that "women do not need marriage to be happy," but I cannot find any claim to the contrary in Wilcox and Nock's article. I suspect that the journalistic coverage of Wilcox and Nock's earlier article on the same topic caused Springer to stereotype Wilcox and Nock as anti-feminist critics and that her critique is largely a response to that stereotypical image. It is not a reasonable critique of the article I read.

I do agree with Springer's contention that movement away from traditional masculinity has benefited men (a claim, incidentally, that does not rebut anything in the critiqued article). In fact, changes in gender roles may have benefited men more than women. On such dimensions of well-being as life expectancy, reported happiness, and reported satisfaction with several domains of life, men in the United States have gained on women since the beginning of the "gender revolution." I suspect, but of course do not know for sure, that the gender revolution contributed substantially to those gains.

Norval D. Glenn
University of Texas at Austin

Most of those who wrote us, however, felt that Springer's criticisms were right on the mark. Like Springer, some readers took exception to what many characterized as Wilcox and Nock's selective interpretation of the data.

Wilcox and Nock suggest that wives who expect little from husbands are happier with marriage than those who desire equality. They advance propositions and measure variables assuming that male family headship is good for women, though they do not test this, *per se*. They rely on differences between a response of 6 and a response of 7 on a single NSFH marital happiness question that is heavily influenced by social desirability. They try to demonstrate the supposed benefits of male "providership" and pitch both partners' "normative commitment to marriage" as major determinants of "happiness." Instead of measuring routine housework (cooking, cleaning, etc.), they measure total household labor (presumably including cars, yardwork, bills, etc.) thus potentially downplaying gendered patterns of family labor. Fortunately, they include perceptions of household labor fairness

² Williams, Joan. 2000. *Unbending Gender: Why Family and Work Conflict and What to Do about It*. New York: Oxford University Press.

and satisfaction with love from husbands in final regressions. The former doubles explained variance in “marital happiness” and the later increases it ten-fold. In the final model that includes wives’ satisfaction with love and affection as a predictor variable, the statistical effects of gender ideology, normative commitment to marriage, and fairness evaluations drop out. Unfortunately, Wilcox and Nock downplay this finding in their conclusion and neglect research showing how women interpret men’s housework as love. In the end, they present a model that predicts that wives who are happy with the love they get from their husbands say they are a little happier with their marriage. They don’t report other NSFH data showing that compared to men, women are significantly less happy with their marriages and the spousal affection they receive. Ultimately they say that traditional marriage benefits women, arguing that male breadwinning gives women a choice to “pursue a personal hobby,” and suggest that feminism has “undercut opportunities for men to make a unique contribution to their marriages and families as breadwinners.” I don’t buy it.

Scott Coltrane
University of California at Riverside

Another reader wrote:

In “‘Her’ Marriage after the Revolutions,” Wilcox and Nock indicate that elements of both old and new ideas promote marital happiness. In order to support this conclusion, however, the authors seem to overemphasize the “old” and underemphasize the new.

Wilcox and Nock state that the emotional investment of husbands far outweighs other factors in predicting marital quality. Husbands’ affection and understanding as well as their sharing activities (including household labor) with their wives are all important ingredients for wives’ marital happiness. This would seem to be a clear recognition of “new” ideas working their way into the marital happiness equation. Indeed, such findings suggest that “new ideas” are winning the day. It is surprising then, to see that the authors slight these findings when drawing their conclusions. Instead of concentrating on emotion work and housework, the authors elect to highlight the importance of “old fashion” commitment to attaining marital happiness. To be sure, commitment is one factor that contributes to marital happiness but as Springer notes in her response to the Wilcox and Nock article, it is a factor dwarfed by the importance of husbands’ emotional investments.

If numbers tell the story, husband’s emotion work gets the clear edge in wives’ happiness with marriage. So why the fall back to commitment? The title, “‘Her’ Marriage after the Revolutions,” might offer a clue. If we believe Frank Luntz’ advice on “words that work,” revolution is one of the very few “re” words Americans don’t like—we recoil from the idea of revolutions; they promote too much change for our comfort level. In invoking the language of revolutions, Wilcox and Nock prime us for a rather selective read of their data, a “comfortable” read that favors the old over the new. In identifying key factors for marital happiness, old ideas are highlighted and brought to center stage even though the data indicates these old ideas would be more appropriately located on the sidelines.

Janet M. Ruane
Montclair State University

Still another had this to say:

There is nothing earth-shattering in Wilcox and Nock's findings. As Springer points out, women are happier in their marriages when their husbands are loving and attentive and when the work required to support and care for a family is justly divided. What concerns us is that Wilcox and Nock interpret their findings more narrowly and normatively than it may first appear. They fault individual expectations, attitudes and "choices" without enough acknowledgement of how society constrains each individual woman and marital relationship. For instance, are stay-at-home wives happier because they are "doing gender" in a "stereotypical way" or because our social institutions and structures make it more acceptable to "do gender" in such a way? They suggest that the gender revolution has failed women for raising their expectations, leading to dissatisfaction and conflict with husbands. But the problem with the gender revolution that is detrimentally underplayed in Wilcox and Nock's analysis is that it has "stalled." Social institutions—particularly the structure of work life for men and women—have not changed enough. In fact, work (as well as parenting), has become more demanding and all-encompassing than ever in recent history. These social processes make it difficult for women and men with children to have satisfying work and family lives.

Susan Markens
Lehman College-CUNY

Julie E. Press
Unaffiliated Scholar

And finally:

Describing and explaining changes in American marriages has long been a focus of social science inquiry. For example, Mason and her colleagues³ wrote more than thirty years ago about the difficulty of dealing with the relative causal roles of the tangled cultural and structural changes influencing married women's labor force participation. How much were changing employment patterns due to the women's movement? How much was due to the changing occupational situation for married men, and the double digit inflation that undermined the buying power of the dollars they were able to earn? Reading the Wilcox and Nock piece was startling for the absence of any serious consideration of the causal role played by forty years of economic changes—changes that have affected marriages and the people in them.

We all include a paragraph or two at the end of our articles on what their shortcomings were and how they should inform future research. In the Wilcox and Nock piece the shortcomings noted are so serious as to throw into question the use of the present tense in discussion of the findings. We cannot overestimate the changes in the fifteen years since the data were collected; more to the point, many currently married people were socialized (do we still use that word?) well after the most intense period of feminist representation in the popular media. This doesn't mean they are feminists, but it does mean that major cohort variations in attitude are likely. The second problem they note, and give one sentence to, is the possibility that they are mistaken in suggesting causal directions when using cross sectional data. Indeed, as popular as it may be to think men help less because their wives are unhappy, it is past time to insist on data casting light on whether that is

³ Mason, K. O., J. L.Czajka, and S. Arber. 1976. "Change in U.S. Women's Sex-Role Attitudes, 1964-1974," *American Journal of Sociology* 41: 573-596.

so (or is so in some marriages) or whether, instead (in some marriages) men doing less work in the house are making their wives unhappy. Many of us are guilty of including this as an acknowledged possible problem, while forging ahead with the inappropriate use of cross-sectional data as the basis for our causal explanations.

*Laura Kramer
Montclair State University*

In addition to worries about analysis and interpretation, some readers felt that Wilcox and Nock's overall approach to this topic requires substantial rethinking.

Few would deny that revolutionary shifts in family life and gender relationships have transformed intimate life at the outset of the 21st century. But how, and with what personal and social consequences? Wilcox and Nock address this very large question by focusing on a smaller piece of the puzzle—the link between marital arrangements and wives' professed marital happiness. Through a cross-sectional analysis of married women, they reach a number of thought-provoking conclusions, including the much discussed and highly controversial claim that women's marital happiness is enhanced when they "let their husbands take the lead in breadwinning."

In response, Springer points out that the findings of Wilcox and Nock do not support the conclusions they draw. In fact, measures of traditionalism provide very little explanatory punch. Wives' satisfaction in marriage is best explained by their perception that a husband is affectionate and understanding, which in turn is related to their degree of satisfaction with the division of domestic labor. In short, wives are most likely to be satisfied when their husbands are emotionally and behaviorally supportive, as a wealth of social science research has documented. Equally important, as Springer notes, a growing group of women "do not need marriage to be happy" and a growing group of men find personal satisfaction in more egalitarian forms of masculinity.

While Springer's nuanced critique is not likely to receive the media attention garnered by Wilcox and Nock's simpler image of happy (rather than desperate) housewives, it prods us to move beyond such a sweeping generalization. Indeed, if Wilcox and Nock had adopted a more complex, dynamic model of women's—and men's—family strategies, they might have reached quite different conclusions. Beyond the headlines, then, here are some suggestions about how to find out what we really need to know about women, men, and marriage:

- Use developmental rather than cross-sectional measures of women, men, and households: A cross-sectional survey of currently married women simply cannot disentangle the causal connections between marital practices and personal adjustments. Wilcox and Nock thus acknowledge that "we do not know how or why one arrangement rather than another emerges. Nor do we know how one changes into another." But without this knowledge, converting associations into causal claims is guesswork or ideology or a combination of the two. Wilcox and Nock argue, for example, that "a strong commitment to the norm of lifelong marriage" causes "a happy marriage," but it is equally, and indeed even more, plausible that satisfaction in a marriage fuels a belief that marriage should be a lifelong commitment for everyone.

- Adopt a dynamic rather than a static model of marriage that takes account of changing social contexts: Since marriage is an increasingly optional choice, currently married women are a self-selected group who do not and cannot represent the diverse array of women's worldviews. And since marriage is an increasingly fluid arrangement, today's married woman may be tomorrow's single woman. We thus need to know how women's views of marriage develop and change in response to dynamics within the home and opportunities outside of it. For example, when women become economically dependent on a husband, they have strong reasons to see marriage as a permanent commitment and to see their own marriages as a happy one. Yet dissatisfied wives have good reasons to seek economic autonomy and, by definition, a less traditional arrangement. Both cases reveal a complex interaction between social constraints, marital strategies, and perceptions of satisfaction that a snapshot view cannot capture.
- Take family diversity seriously: Rather than replacing the homemaker-breadwinner household with a new hegemonic form, the family and gender revolutions have ushered in widespread and sustained diversity. It is thus ironic and misleading to make generalizations about the "best" strategy, without regard to varied social circumstances and personal experiences. Not only do contemporary women—and men—claim the right to build their lives in diverse ways, but research consistently shows that, when it comes to family arrangements, one size does not fit all. Amid this diversity, what matters most is a household's ability to meet the twin challenges of providing economic and emotional support. As even Wilcox and Nock show, what a married woman really wants is a partner who is supportive in myriad ways and thus does not leave her with the burden of doing it all.

The gender revolution will continue to reshape women's lives, and inexorable social and economic forces will continue to make economic autonomy both attractive and necessary to a growing number of women, whether or not some wish it were not so. In this context, those who care about women's happiness would do well to avoid overly broad generalizations about what women want and focus instead on deciphering the social contexts and policies that would give women genuine options rather than leave them facing intractable work-family conflicts and persisting inequality at work and at home. If and when women can claim equal economic and social opportunities, we will be in better position to know what kinds of marital arrangements they ultimately desire and deem best for themselves and their families.

*Kathleen Gerson
New York University*

And some felt that the exchange merely skimmed the surface of the larger normative issues that demand our continued discussion.

I write with a comment on the debate in the Forum section of the March 2007 issue, where Brad Wilcox and Steve Nock as well as Kristen Springer discussed Wilcox and Nock's 2006 *Social Forces* article and the ensuing media storm. Wilcox and Nock reprised two of their 2006 findings: women report less satisfaction with their marriages when they contribute over a third of family income, and they report more marital satisfaction when they give their husbands high ranks for loving and understanding them. Springer argues that the second finding is the important one because the "effect" size is massively larger. I agree with her that the negative effect of wives' earning role that so mesmerized reporters is tiny in absolute terms. But I would not emphasize its relative size. In my view, the fact

that women's report of how much their husbands show love and understanding trumps all else in its correlation with marital satisfaction reveals little more than that we are in the modern world where marriage is about love. In fact, my main critique of the Wilcox/Nock paper is that it is close to putting one measure of marital quality in a model to predict another measure of marital quality, particularly as both are wives' reports.

But more than a scientific skirmish over the size and causal status of coefficients seems at stake here. Deep normative questions about the value of feminism and of traditional marriage are at stake. It is striking, though, how discussion of normatively charged issues—in academic journals and the press—is typically couched in terms that suggest we are just debating the empirical facts. I'm all for debating the relevant facts. But I also believe that our discourse on public issues is impoverished by the fact that we lack spaces in which it is acceptable to debate normative value questions while not pretending that they are merely about the facts. Most normative claims hinge on other more axiomatic normative claims, as well as on empirical claims. For example, when I (and other feminists) have made claims about the merits of marriages where earning and household work are shared, these claims hinge on a normative axiom that men and women are equally entitled to whatever rewards life offers, together with the empirical hypothesis that unequal earning power engenders unequal power and satisfaction. I take the fact that Wilcox and Nock did not find a positive effect of women's co-equal earning on their satisfaction as a challenge to hypotheses I have put forward. It makes me want to continue to investigate the determinants of power and satisfaction in marriage, while realizing that answering these questions is not sufficient to decide the deeper value questions about whether gender hierarchies are morally wrong. I, for one, wish that we had more spaces where we debated these normative questions.

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Want to enter the debate on this topic or respond to “The Forum” exchanges published in the June or September issues? Send your comments to me (400 words maximum) at cerulo@rci.rutgers.edu. Responses for the next issue must reach my desk by December 1, 2007.