

Research or Rhetoric? A Response to Wilcox and Nock

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In their essay “Her’ Marriage after the Revolutions,” Wilcox and Nock reprise their recent *Social Forces* article where they drew several unsubstantiated conclusions about predictors of wives’ marital happiness (Wilcox and Nock, 2006). These skewed conclusions paved the way for media commentators to spin Wilcox and Nock’s research into exaggerated headlines such as “The Return of the Happy Housewife” and “Desperate Feminist Wives” (O’Rourke, 2006; Tierney, 2006). Focusing on Wilcox and Nock’s research—rather than their rhetoric—paints a much different picture.

WHAT THEIR FINDINGS REALLY SAY: LOVING HUSBANDS = HAPPY WIVES

Wilcox and Nock’s actual findings are better summarized with the heading: “Loving Husbands = Happy Wives.” Indeed, the authors state that “women’s assessments of men’s love, affection and understanding (and to a lesser degree men’s quality time) is *by far the most powerful predictor of women’s marital quality in our models*, which include a range of potential factors that might influence women’s marital quality” (Wilcox and Nock, 2006:1332, emphasis added).

Wilcox and Nock arrive at this conclusion through testing a series of nested models predicting wives’ marital happiness. In the first model, they introduce a large set of variables including school-age children, husband’s

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education, race, wife's gender-role egalitarianism, wife's employment, and wife earning more than one-third of the marital income that *together* predict only 3% of the variance in wives' marital happiness. This tiny percentage of explained variance is the factual basis on which Wilcox and Nock claim that they "found significant support for the gender model of marriage: more traditional-minded women, women who did not work outside the home, and women whose husbands earned more than two-thirds of the family's income all reported that they were happier in their marriages" (Wilcox and Nock, 2007:106).²

In the second model, they add religious attendance and marital commitment, which increases the variance explained by a mere 1% (making a total of 4%). Third, they add wives' discontent with husbands' household labor, which doubles the percent of wives' marital happiness explained to 8%.

For their fourth model, they add two measures of "husbands' emotion work" which increases the explanation of wives' marital happiness to 53%—an explanatory power over 17 times larger than their first model. According to Wilcox and Nock's own research, wives' happiness with their husbands' affection and understanding is the single most important predictor of wives' marital happiness. And, what predicts wives' happiness with their husbands' affection and understanding? According to Wilcox and Nock's data, wives' degree of satisfaction or discontent with inequity in the division of household labor trumps *all* other variables as the *single most important* predictor of how wives perceive husbands' empathy. In other words, women do not think their husbands are particularly loving when they perceive that housework is divided inequitably. Even Wilcox and Nock acknowledge that women are happier in a marriage with "an emotionally engaged husband, as well as a husband who does his fair share" (Wilcox and Nock, 2007:108).

The most sensible interpretation of these results is that increases in husbands' share of household labor will lead to an improvement in wives' marital happiness. But Wilcox and Nock argue instead that wives are too critical of their husbands: "We suspect that higher expectations of intimacy and equality among women, especially more egalitarian-minded women, have led them to view their husbands' emotion work [and housework] more critically; we also suspect that these expectations have increased marital conflict and—in turn—dampened men's marital

² Wilcox and Nock distort West and Zimmerman's research and theoretical contributions by citing the "Doing Gender" article in the development of their "gender model" (Wilcox and Nock, 2007:2). The "Doing Gender" article by West and Zimmerman is a feminist classic for understanding gender as a stratification system—in other words when we "do" gender, we perpetuate inequality (West and Zimmerman, 1987).

emotional work” (Wilcox and Nock, 2006:1340). They further argue the wives would be happier if only they could view their “husbands’ domestic and emotion work through rose-colored lenses” (Wilcox and Nock, 2007:106).

Indeed, Wilcox and Nock are generous with such suggestions. They claim that if wives create a “family myth” of happiness they “may be more inclined to view their marriage in a positive light...to legitimize their investments in their own marriages and their self-imposed dependency on their husbands” (Wilcox and Nock, 2006:1324). They also argue that “stay-at-home wives are happier in part because they are ‘doing gender’ in a stereotypical way” (Wilcox and Nock, 2007:106), despite the fact that wives’ hours worked does *not* predict marital happiness after controlling for husbands’ emotion work.

Wilcox and Nock’s arguments sound remarkably similar to 1950s cultural attitudes about happy housewives, including their claim that stay-at-home wives are happier in marriage because “they may find it easier to focus on their marriages when [they are] not juggling married life, child-rearing, and work all at the same time” (Wilcox and Nock, 2007:106). So now rather than husbands’ emotion work being the primary predictor of wives’ happiness, to which their actual results point, Wilcox and Nock argue instead that women should focus on being happy with whatever their husbands actually do.

WOMEN DO NOT NEED MARRIAGE TO BE HAPPY

Not only have Wilcox and Nock selectively focused on some of their findings at the expense of others, they have also misjudged reality and existing research. Although many women value committed marriage, they do not *need* marriage to be happy. Indeed, many women and men are not married; By 2005 married couples made up less than half of all households in the United States (U.S. Census Bureau, 2006). Furthermore, research has demonstrated that if women must choose between never marrying and being in a traditional marriage, no less than 80% would rather go it alone (Gerson, 2002). Divorce rates also indicate that women are not willing to stay in unhappy marriages. Indeed, about 50% of first marriages and 60% of second marriages will likely end in divorce (Coontz, 2000). Women have also been consistently more likely to file for divorce than men (Brinig and Allen, 2000). Although Wilcox and Nock may wish it to be otherwise, women are not willing to create a “family myth” of happiness in marriages they see as unfair.

THE NEW MASCULINE MALE

Wilcox and Nock's own data support the argument that the route to wives' marital happiness is through what they call "the gender revolution." Husbands' participation in housework is the best explanation for wives' satisfaction with husbands' emotional investments, and wives' perception of husbands' emotional engagement is the best predictor of wives' marital happiness. Fortunately, current research suggests that the movement to the "New Masculine Male"—although slow and far from complete—involves domestic equity and emotional support (Sullivan, 2004, 2006). Indeed, both men and women report wanting gender egalitarian families. In fact husbands are engaging in more housework, and marriage is increasingly becoming a union based on emotional connection and companionship (Coontz, 2005).

Although Wilcox and Nock only study wives' marital happiness, I and others who have studied both men and women find that the shift away from "traditional" masculinity can also benefit men (Carr, 2002; Coltrane, 1996; Ehrenreich, 1983; Gerson, 1994; Kessler and McRae, 1982; Springer, 2006, 2007; Staines, Pottick, and Fudge, 1986). In my own research, I find that conventional breadwinner expectations can harm husbands' health (Springer, 2006, 2007). Because old-style masculinity is intimately tied with being "on top"—being the higher earner when wives work for pay—older men who earn less than their wives suffer adverse health effects from "breadwinner anxiety." This outdated breadwinner definition of masculinity clashes with reality, resulting in detrimental effects for some men. The good news, however, is that the continuing movement toward equity in marriage can improve *both* husbands' health and wives' marital happiness.

Indeed, supporting equity in marriage is a reasonable and obvious implication of Wilcox and Nock's *own* research—a strategy far more plausible (and just) than advising wives to wear "rose-colored glasses." Put quite simply—and without the rhetorical flourishes—Wilcox and Nock's data clearly demonstrate that what matters is reshaping masculinity so that men can be emotionally engaged partners willing to share the "dirty" work that contemporary marriage sometimes entails.

It is time to recognize that the 1950s are gone for good. Women do not need marriage to be happy, and fewer women than in the past need marriage to be economically stable. As a result, most women take a clear-eyed approach to what they want in a man rather than put on "rose-colored glasses" and adjust their hopes downward. Telling women to be grateful for anything they get has been tried before, and it did not work. Indeed, in 1963 Betty Friedan published *The Feminine Mystique* exposing

the role of housewife as stifling and in doing so spurred the second wave of feminism (Friedan, 1963). Unfortunately, over 40 years after Friedan's best-selling book, Wilcox and Nock still offer the antiquated and discredited suggestion that marriage is wives' work and assuming the "traditional" marital role is paramount for women's happiness.

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