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WHAT ARE THESE GUYS AFRAID OF?

Old attitudes are no reason to avoid a smart career woman

BY KRISTEN W. SPRINGER

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Writer Michael Noer, in an article published on Forbes.com last week, claims recent social science research supports his advice to readers of Forbes: "Don't marry career women."

Well, I'm a social scientist, and my research suggests the underlying reality is better represented by this caution: Insecure men shouldn't marry career women.

Noer's "nine reasons to steer clear of career women" are supposedly based on "a lot of economic theory and a bit of common sense." But the logic of his article assumes that men deserve more than women do, both in their paychecks and in their homes. Indeed, Noer seems to prefer the historical situation of wives as homemakers and husbands as breadwinners that characterized the 1950s and early 1960s.

So what would Noer suggest for 2006? Should we break out the apron and kick off our shoes because men need us in the kitchen? Hey, how did husbands get off the hook? And don't wives "need a wife," too? That's common sense these days.

Indeed, in 2006, wives still shoulder most of the housework and child care. Even when both spouses work outside the home, wives do double the housework. That would certainly make me tired, unhappy and resistant to having more kids - just as Noer argues that wives with careers are. And are wives the only ones to blame for messier houses? Really, guys, register for the vacuum cleaner you prefer, and then use it!

Noer also blames career wives for their husbands' ill health. He argues that career wives work too many hours to provide the care that would prevent their beleaguered husbands' heart attacks, cancer and accidents. Research I've done tells a different story. Wives' hours at work are not the source of their husbands' health problems. Rather, a husband's health is adversely affected only when he earns less than 50 percent of the marital income, regardless of the number of hours his wife works.

Why? "Breadwinner anxiety" may well be the issue, according to my research. In the United States, many of us continue to believe that being manly depends on being the primary breadwinner. Because masculinity is so intimately tied with being the earner, or at least the higher earner when wives work for pay, men who earn less than their wives suffer the real physical pangs of "failure." The culprit is not women's career success, but rather outdated definitions of masculinity.

For career women and the men who love them, there is hopeful news: My research is based on a sample of men and women who are, on average, in their 50s and whose ideas of masculinity were shaped many decades ago. But younger generations of married and soon-to-be-married couples have grown up with two working parents, and, one hopes, they can bypass some of this health-harming breadwinner anxiety.

Noer is therefore not only inaccurate in blaming wives, he also is shortchanging a new generation of couples. Remember the 1980s prediction that women who were 40 and unmarried faced better odds of being killed by a terrorist than of finding a husband? That turned out to be very false indeed, because it was based on what had been true for a previous generation, and norms changed.



The same is true here: More recent generations of men are likely to be less afraid of a vacuum cleaner and of their wives' career accomplishments. And their health - and marriages - will be better for it.

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