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Uncovering Gender**Women Happier as Homemakers? Time to Recheck Data***Run Date: 03/22/06**By Rivers and Barnett
WeNews commentators*

A recent study bandied about in the news media finds women are more happily married when their husbands win the bread. The finding is so different from related research that our commentators call it an "outlier" not to be trusted.

Editor's Note: *The following is a commentary. The opinions expressed are those of the author and not necessarily the views of Women's eNews.*

(WOMENSENEWS)--Are homemakers happier in their marriages than working women?

Are wives happier when their husbands are the major breadwinners?

Is too much equality between men and women bad for marital happiness?

A new study suggesting yes, yes and yes has won inordinate attention.

New York Times columnist John Tierney looked at the study and a few weeks ago concluded that women "want their husbands to be providers who give them financial security and freedom."

Around the same time, in an op-ed column in the Los Angeles Times, Charlotte Allen, co-editor of the InkWell blog for the Independent Women's Forum, cited the study as proof that "the more traditional a marriage is . . . the higher the percentage of happy wives."

The story also buzzed around the blogosphere and was fodder on some cable shows.

Here We Go Again

Caryl Rivers



Rosalind Chait Barnett

Here we go again. Last November in this column we looked at the weak data behind a media outburst about men not liking smart women.

Before that we looked at all the guff about women at elite universities wanting to just say no to careers.

Meanwhile, we seem to have the ongoing job of reminding the other news media that despite its devotion to the idea that the male of the species is an unregenerate chore boor, the actual research shows him helping out more and more around the house.

Now some in the news media are once again latching on to a flawed study offering bad news for ambitious women.

Published this month in the sociology journal *Social Forces* (University of North Carolina), the study by W. Bradford Wilcox and Steven Nock of the University of Virginia is based on data from studies in the early 1990s.

The findings are so atypical that the study is what's called an "outlier." As columnist Ellen Goodman reports, when sociologist Scott Coltrane of the University of California-Riverside used the same data set, he found no difference in marital happiness between homemakers and working women.

Over the past 15 years, some 20 studies have looked at the association between women's employment and earnings and their marital happiness.

These studies have involved different samples of people and different methods of arriving at results. But they all tell the same story: Employed women are as happy (and perhaps happier) in their marriages as non-employed women and having an income generally improves a woman's marital happiness.

Failing Marriages an Indicator

The divorce rate is another important indicator.

Do working women's marriages fail at a higher rate than those of homemakers? No. In fact, as University of Michigan sociologist Hiromi Ono found in 1998, a woman is more likely to divorce if she has no earnings than if she does in fact earn money. Other researchers find that the higher the household income--whatever the source--the higher the quality of family life and marriage.

Studies researching the same subject have drawn different conclusions. But reader beware: black-and-white conclusions can't be fairly drawn.

The Virginia study found wives happier if their husbands were the breadwinners. Other research disagrees. Some 42 percent of today's married women outearn their husbands. Are these marriages falling apart? Not according to the divorce data. These marriages are as stable as those in which husbands earn more.

In the 1990s, the gap between husbands' and wives' earnings began to narrow. At the same time the divorce rate--which had been on the increase--

leveled off. If Wilcox and Nock were correct, and women naturally yearn for male breadwinners, we should be seeing an increase in divorce as women earn more than their husbands. But no such trend exists.

In a 2001 analysis of data from our own study of 300 dual-earner couples, funded by the National Institutes of Mental Health, wives' earnings--whether higher, lower or the same as their husbands'--had no effect on their marital happiness. (And, for the most part, men's marital happiness was unrelated to how much their wives earned.)

Yearnings in Question

The notion that women yearn for a traditional breadwinner is highly questionable, and stands in stark contrast to the large body of literature in this area.

Sociologists Elaine Wethington (Cornell University) and Ronald Kessler (Harvard Medical School) found that women who were homemakers at the beginning of their three-year study and then went to work full time reported a decrease in psychological distress. In contrast, women who were employed full time and then dropped out to stay home reported an increase in distress, regardless if they had children. Women who had a child but stayed in the work force showed no increase in distress. But women who had a child and dropped out of the work force experienced a major increase in stress.

One of Wilcox and Nock's strongest findings--that men's loving attention to their wives is an important predictor of women's happiness--may be true. Or it may not be. You can't possibly know how attentive the husband is unless you collect data from the husbands and these researchers did not do that.

"This study is troubling because it depends on wives' ratings of both their husbands' emotional support and also their own satisfaction with their marriages," Robert T. Brennan, a research associate at Harvard Medical School told Women's eNews in an e-mail. "The study relies on just wives' reports of marital satisfaction, yet marriage is a two-way street where husbands and wives often don't see eye to eye."

Overall, the picture of who is--and who isn't--happily married is very complex. Both women in paid employment and traditional homemakers may have good marriages or bad ones. But the simple scenario sketched out by the Virginia study just doesn't tell us much.

When journalists come across a study like this--that says something so radically different from other studies--they should start asking questions and not automatically embrace the results.

Caryl Rivers and Rosalind C. Barnett are authors of "Same Difference: How Gender Myths Are Hurting Our Relationships, Our Children and Our Jobs" (Basic Books 2004.) Rivers is a professor of journalism at Boston University and Barnett is senior scientist at the Women's Studies Research Center at Brandeis University.

Women's eNews welcomes your comments. E-mail us at

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