

Traditional Marriage, Traditional Division of Labor? The Effects of Covenant Marriage and the Division of Household Labor on Gender Differences in Depression

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Introduction

Research consistently shows a strong association between gender and depression. Women have higher prevalence rates and more intense forms of depression than men (Gove 1978; Aneshensel 1992). Our research contributes to this literature by exploring how the type of marriage, division of household and breadwinning labor, and perceptions of relationship fairness between wives and husbands affects levels of depression among newlywed couples. The division of household labor and paid employment are still highly gendered practices (Sanchez 1994). However, recent research suggests that more traditional and evangelical couples try to mute the conflicts and feelings of inequity which arise from the gender division of labor through their focus on the symbolic necessity of gendered roles. Our data provide a unique opportunity to explore whether symbolically embracing gender traditionalism is useful for reducing depression through an analysis of two types of marriage, standard and covenant. First, covenant marriage requires premarital counseling and marital counseling, if problems arise. Both forms of counseling may reduce the likelihood of depression. Moreover, covenant marriage provides couples a symbolic rhetoric to justify gendered inequities in their relationship, thus perhaps reducing the likelihood that actual or perceived inequities in the division of labor enhance distress and depression. Thus, we conduct the first analysis of whether covenant marriage buffers against depression and mediates the potential effects of the gender division of labor on depression among newlywed couples.

Three questions guide this study. First, do wives and husbands differ in levels of depression? Second, does the gendered division of housework and paid employment affect depression for wives and husbands and do so in gender-differentiated ways? Third, does covenant marriage buffer couples against depression, especially from depression associated with stresses associated with gendered marital roles?

Perceived Entitlement to Equity, Newlywed Gender Roles, and Depression

We use a distributive justice framework to explore how newlywed couples understand their sense of entitlement within a relationship. Research demonstrates that women do not feel entitled to receive benefits that align with the value of their work (Major 1993, Thompson 1991). This muted sense of entitlement also may explain why wives employed in the paid labor force continue to perform the majority of household tasks as well. Major (1993, pg 155) suggests that “women and men may legitimize the distribution of family work by the belief that her *responsibility* for family work and child care is a just exchange for his *responsibility* for breadwinning.” In essence, wives may be exchanging housework for their husbands’ income, regardless of whether the wives are employed or not.

Research has also pointed to the symbolic meaning of housework which emphasizes how the values and meanings of gender influence wives’ and husbands’ orientation to housework (Thompson 199, Sanchez and Kane 1996). Societal norms help produce gender role attitudes that view housework as wives’ work. Thompson (1991, pg 190) states that “for women to feel that they deserve a better domestic arrangement, they must see the value of their own contributions to family work.” Wives often perform housework as a way of caring and showing love for their families and would rather “keep peace” at home than demand greater equity in spousal roles and responsibilities (Thompson 1991).

While wives may not typically view the division of labor as unfair, gendered inequities, especially in nascent marital roles as newlyweds, may indirectly affect mental health. We address whether the actual couple gender division of labor, perceptions of fairness, and gender role attitudes affects wives’ and husbands’ depression and whether these effects differ by gender of the spouse. We explore whether inequities increase depression among wives as compared to husbands. We hypothesize that actual and perceived gendered inequities and unfavorable disadvantage may

increase depression among women, but have no effects on men's depression. Men may not perceive the gendered division of housework and paid employment as a salient domain impacting mental distress or depression. Thus, our core hypotheses are that women may internalize anxiety about their lower sense of entitlement and actual inequities and manifest this anxiety as depression in fundamentally different ways than men. Further, we explore whether these effects persist even among couples selected for greater support of gender traditionalism, the covenant married.

Hypothesis 1: Wives will have higher depression scores than husbands. *Hypothesis 2:* The actual division of household labor and paid employment and perceived inequities and gender role attitudes will affect wives' depression more than husbands' depression. Female-stereotypical housework should be associated with depression, since the labor is classified as being monotonous, routine, and repetitive. Perceived unfairness to the wife in the division of household labor should affect wives' depression, but not husbands'. *Hypothesis 3:* Covenant marriage will act as a buffer against depression, and will have a stronger impact on wives than on husbands. Those that enter covenant marriages agree to obtain premarital counseling and agree to receive counseling and participate in a waiting period prior to obtaining a divorce. These aspects of covenant marriage are likely to produce a sense of security within marriage and should result in less depressed wives than those in standard marriages. Covenant marriage will also act as a stronger buffer on wives' depression, because of the stronger sense of what is expected of them as wives. Less stress may occur because negotiating gender roles is not anticipated by covenant wives.

Data and Method

The data used for this research are from the Marriage Matters project, which is funded by the National Science Foundation. The project was designed to determine what makes new marriages strong and healthy. The data are a three-wave longitudinal study which took place over five years beginning in 1998 (Marriage Matters, 1999-2000, University of Virginia). The participants of the survey were newly married couples in Louisiana. The unique aspect of this data is that two forms of marriage are analyzed, covenant and standard marriage. The data allow us to see whether a more traditional marriage will act as a buffer for depression. The data also contains responses from both spouses that will determine if gendered differences are present. The sample consists of data from sixteen randomly selected parishes that are proportionate in size. All of the covenant marriage licenses were selected from these parishes, as well as the matched standard marriage licenses that were filed next to the covenant licenses. The sampling frame consists of 1,714 licenses in which 1,310 couples were confirmed. (For a more detailed description see Nock et al 2003). Our research focuses on the first wave of data collected when the couples were newly married, about three to six months after their wedding. The data include information on 707 couples. For our study, the effective sample size is 482. From the original 707 couples, 21 wives and 122 husbands did not complete the survey, bringing the sample size down to 564. The dependent variable also had an additional 28 wives and 27 husbands missing, further reducing the sample size to 509. Finally, an additional 27 cases were missing within the focal independent and control variables.

We use seemingly unrelated regression techniques. This method estimates equations for husbands' and wives' depression levels simultaneously. The SUR technique is useful for cross-sectional household data to account for the error that is assumed to occur because of unmeasured characteristics within the household (Sanchez 1994). The technique also allows for constraints tests on coefficients across the joint equations.

Measures

Dependent Variable

The dependent variable is a scale of depressive symptoms based off of the Center for Epidemiological Studies Depression CES-D Scale. This scale represents the number of personal behaviors that have occurred in the past week. The behaviors are feel bothered by things that normally do not bother you, poor appetite, could not shake off the blues, trouble focusing, feel depressed, everything is an effort, feel fearful, sleep restlessly, talk less than usual, feel lonely, feel sad, and feel like you just could not get going. For each behavior the respondent selected the number of days per week that the behavior applied to them. This created a scale of values ranging from 0 – 84 (wives' chronbach's alpha =0.91, husband's chronbach's alpha=0.90).

Focal Independent Measures of Division of Household Labor

Due to space constraints a detailed description of each measure is not possible, only the name of each index is listed. The main independent variables consist of three measures representing the gendered perceptions of the division of household labor. They are self-reported female and male stereotypical housework duties that are mainly the respondent's responsibility, self-reported perceptions of unfairness to self of the division of household labor and self-reported perceptions of unfairness to the spouse of the division of household labor, and indices representing self-reported traditional gender role attitudes for both wives and husbands.

Preliminary Results

Table 1 indicates that wives do have significantly higher levels of depression than husbands. Table 2 presents our preliminary multivariate results. In unshown analyses, we found that covenant marriage reduces depression for wives, but that this effect was mediated entirely by the intervening measure of religiosity as shown in this complete model. Covenant status was not statistically significant for husbands. Gender differences were found in the focal independent measures of division of household labor. Wives appear to be affected by the actual amount of labor that they perform, as self-reported male stereotypical housework appears to increase depression for wives. Perceptions of unfairness do not appear to affect wives' depression levels. We see the opposite relationships regarding husbands' depression. The actual amount of labor does not appear to impact husbands' levels of depression. Rather, husbands' perceptions of their own levels of unfairness and their reports of their wives' level of unfairness appear to increase husbands' levels of depression. Traditional gender role attitudes appear to increase wives depression, but do not impact husbands' depression. The last result we mention regards notions of breadwinning roles in the household. Wives' employment status significantly decreases depression in women, but has no significant impact on husbands' depression. Husbands' income significantly decreases husbands' depression, but has no significant impact on wives' depression.

Table 1: Depression by Gender

	Mean	Std. Deviation
Wife Depression	12.82***	13.53
Husband Depression	9.19***	12.04

N=482

***Paired T-test significant at 0.001.

Table 2. Seemingly Unrelated Regression Model for Predictors of Depression, All Controls

	Wife		Husband	
	β	Std. Error	β	Std. Error
Intercept	32.54***	6.50	15.5**	5.97
Covenant Status				
Covenant Marriage	-2.02	1.30	-1.05	1.24
Household Allocations				
Self -Reported Female Stereotypical Housework Index	-0.38	0.33	-0.49	0.60
Self -Reported Male Stereotypical Housework Index	1.95***	0.59	-0.26	0.38
Wife Employed	-3.13*	1.34	0.46	1.28
Husband's Income	-0.12	0.29	-0.59*	0.28
Gendered Perceptions of Division of Household Labor				
Self-Reported Perceptions of Unfairness in Division of Labor	2.15	1.46	7.70***	2.20
Self-Reported Perceptions of Unfairness in Spouse's Division of Household Labor	3.30	2.12	2.38 †	1.38
Wife's Traditional Gender Role Attitudes Index	0.44**	0.15	0.17	0.14
Husband's Traditional Gender Role Attitudes Index	-0.19	0.16	0.02	0.15
Religious Orientation				
Religiosity Index	-0.15	0.14	0.16	0.12
Both Fundamentalist	-2.81 †	1.48	-1.06	1.41
Premarital Circumstances				
Premarital Disadvantages Index	1.04**	0.40	0.61	0.39
Premarital Risk Factors Index	3.79***	0.70	1.89**	0.61
Total Family and Peer Approval	-0.29**	0.12	-0.15	0.11
Community Participation				
Joint Community Activities Index	-0.31**	0.12	-0.24*	0.12
Childhood Problems				
Major Childhood Problems Index	0.62**	0.23	0.49 †	0.28
Marital, Cohabitation, and Parenthood Histories				
Husband Ever Divorced ^a	2.08	2.04	-0.55	1.95
Wife Ever Divorced	5.19*	2.37	1.43	2.23
Both Divorced	-3.21	3.06	-3.96	2.85
Cohabited Only Together ^b	1.01	1.34	1.37	1.27
Either Partner Cohabited With Other	-2.93*	1.48	-0.75	1.41
At Least One Child at Marriage Start	-1.92	1.49	-0.82	1.40
More than One Child at Marriage Start	1.62	1.96	5.64**	1.87
Sociodemographic Controls				
High School Graduate ^c	-4.05	2.64	-2.28	2.19
Some College	-5.02 †	2.75	-2.57	2.35
College Graduate	-1.77	2.80	-1.04	2.35
Wife's Age	-0.28**	0.10	-0.35	0.94
Both Partners Black ^d	1.55	2.02	1.07	1.93
Both Partners Other Race	-0.78	1.71	0.12	1.64
F Statistic	6.29***		3.58***	
R ²	0.29		0.19	

(N=482)

†p<0.1 *p<0.05 **p<0.01 ***p<0.001 (two-tail test)

NOTE: Excluded categories are (a) first marriage, (b) no cohabitation either partner, (c) less than high school, (d) both partners White.