

The Happy Homemaker?
Married Women's Satisfaction in Cross-national Perspective

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The increase in married women's labor force participation rates is one of the most significant developments of the 20th Century (Blau 1964; Oppenheimer 1970). Over the decades, demographers have considered how wives' employment is related to fertility, marital selection (Sweeney and Cancian 2004), divorce, and other phenomena. The significance of paid employment to women's own life satisfaction has been of broad and sustained interest stretching from the liberal feminists of the 19th Century (Budig 2004) to the *Feminist Mystique* of the mid-20th (Friedan 1963) and into the present when the question is enshrined in a Likert item in the GSS scale of gender conservatism--"Being a housewife is just as fulfilling as working for pay." Recently, the distribution of happiness has attracted the attention of demographers (Zimmermann and Easterlin 2006) and has emerged as an important "quality of life" indicator in the European Union. Given the historical increase in married women's labor force participation and the renewed interest in happiness as an indicator of well-being, we ask whether being a housewife is truly as satisfying as working for pay, what factors are associated with the satisfaction of married women, and whether the characteristics of countries matter.

Background

There are a number of reasons to expect women's labor force participation to matter to their general happiness, but it is not clear whether any effect of paid employment will be positive or negative. On the one hand, women's employment can be argued to enhance women's psychological well-being by increasing their economic resources, expanding their social network, and immersing them in the socially valued and personally fulfilling role of paid worker. One line of research emphasizes the possibility of "positive spillover" from work to home in terms of energized states and upbeat feelings (Stevens, Minnotte, Mannon, and Kiger 2007). The implication is that that the characteristics of jobs matter--with those offering flexibility, family-friendly policies, and enjoyable work promoting women's life satisfaction.

On the other hand, women's paid employment may have negative effects on their happiness and life satisfaction. Because of their traditional responsibilities for the home and children, employed women are particularly vulnerable to the stresses arising from work-family conflict. Some of this tension between work and family roles has been expressed in the time-bind literature, which emphasizes working women's diminished time available to meet the demands of home and family. Research has also stressed the negative spill-over of fatigue and negative emotions from the workplace to the home (Stevens, Minnotte, Mannon, and Kiger 2007).

Studies on women's marital satisfaction have argued that employment may undermine their marital quality (and by extension their personal happiness) by creating conflicts about the household division of labor or, more generally, by challenging traditional gender expectations. Working women may be more dissatisfied with existing gender inequality in marriage, because they hold more progressive views about gender roles (Bolzendahl and Myers 2004)—a product of their selection into employment (Cunningham, Beutel, Barber, and Thornton 2005) or possibly their socialization in the workplace (Banaszak and Plutzer 1993). Establishing a causal relationship between women's happiness and their employment, of course, is difficult. Women who are unhappy with their marriages may be more likely to enter the labor force, perhaps as a precursor to divorce (although evidence is mixed). Based on longitudinal data, Schoen, Rogers and Amato (Schoen 2006) report that working women express greater happiness than full-time homemakers, but changes in work status do not prompt changes in marital happiness.

To date, research on the implications of married women's employment for their psychological well-being has focused on a single country, usually the U.S. (Schoen 2006). Theorizing on the issue, however, raises questions as to whether a relationship between a woman's work status and her happiness generalizes beyond the American case. For example, work might be unrelated to women's happiness in countries with family-friendly policies (e.g., parental leave, public child care) or employment practices (e.g., part-time employment) that can help married women to reconcile work and family. Similarly, employment might not matter where public opinion is more favorable to maternal employment or where high rates of female labor force participation make paid employment normative. On these criteria, we might expect women in certain welfare regimes (e.g., the Nordic social democratic states which embody many of these qualities) to have higher overall satisfaction with their lives.

Data and Methods

To investigate the relationship of employment with women's psychological well-being, this paper draws on data come from the 2002 Family and Gender module of the International Social Survey Program (ISSP). Collected by independent research organizations, the data are nationally representative of 30 populations: Australia, Austria, Belgium, Brazil, Bulgaria, Chile, Cyprus, Czech Republic, Denmark, Finland, Germany (East and West), Great Britain, Hungary, Ireland, Israel, Latvia, Mexico, Netherlands, New Zealand, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Russia, Slovak Republic, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, and the United States. Analysis focuses on women, 18-65, who were married or, following the conventions of a few countries, living as married. Effective sample sizes range from 75 in East Germany to 435 in Spain.

Because clustering of respondents within countries violates the assumptions of ordinary least squares regression, we employ hierarchical linear modeling to test for an association of women's psychological well-being with micro-level variables at the individual level and macro-level indicators of the country context. The numbers and

diversity of the ISSP countries permit us to consider a variety of country characteristics and to include several macro-variables in a model.

The dependent variables measuring psychological well-being come from Likert items on the respondent's satisfaction with work, family, and life in general. We consider two measures of employment, a work status variable (full-time, part-time, and not at all) and a weekly hours of paid work variable. Control variables in the analyses include age, presence of children less than 6, presence of children 6-18, household income, both partners' educations, their relative incomes, respondent's gender egalitarian attitudes, church attendance, belief in the importance of marriage, husband's weekly hours of paid work, his relative share of total housework hours, his "symbolic" participation in female-typed household tasks, and the wife's satisfaction with the division of household labor.

Country-level variables considered in preliminary analyses include family-friendly policies (parental leave, public childcare), employment access policies (affirmative action, lack of discriminatory policies), a legacy of maternal employment (% 45-65 who report having had a working mother before age 14), % with attitudes supporting full-time work by mothers, gender equality (GEM, % female of parliamentarians), % female in high level occupations, female to male earnings ratio, and regime type (social democratic, liberal conservative, post socialist, Mediterranean, Asian, and Latin American). As seen in Table 1, preliminary analyses find a statistically significant ($p < .01$) correlation between most indicators and general satisfaction. Some results are counter-intuitive, however. Family-friendly policies are negatively related to married women's satisfaction while residence in a social democratic (Nordic) country is not significantly related at the .05 level. Future work will consider female labor force participation rates and will focus the analyses on macro-variables hypothesized to interact with micro-level work status.

At the individual-level, a number of characteristics of the woman, her spouse and their household are seen to be significantly related at the .05 level with her satisfaction with work, home, and life in general. Importantly, her hours of paid work figure in none of these indicators of psychological well-being. Future analyses will consider whether her work status (distinguishing full-time homemakers from full-time and part-time workers) fares any better. Consistent with results for the U.S., women's satisfaction is significantly related to relationship variables, including her assessment of the fairness of the household division of labor and her husband's token participation in "women's work" around the house.

Table 2. Correlation of country level indicators with overall satisfaction of wives

	<i>Correlation with overall satisfaction</i>
Social democratic	.00
Liberal	.05**
Conservative (reference)	.08**
Mediterranean	-.06**
Post socialist	-.18**
Asian	-.04**
Latin American	.09**
Gem2	.08**
Seats in parliament held by women (as % of total)	.02
Female legislators and managers (as% of total)	-.03
Female professional and technical workers (% of total)	-.18**
Ratio of estimated female to male earned income	-.13**
Affirmative action (1/0)	.05**
Absence of discriminatory policy	.07**
Parent leave	-.14**
Public child care	-.03
Working mother when 14 years old	-.16**
Support for fulltime working women	-.05**

Table 2. HLM results for wives' satisfaction (individual-level)

	Satisfaction of wives with		
	life	work	home
<i>Individual level</i>			
Hours of paid work			
Egalitarian attitudes	+*		
Church attendance	***		+*
Importance of marriage	***		
Relative share in housework			
Symbolic participation of men housework	+*		***
Fair share in housework	***	+*	***
Husband income relative to wife		-*	
Female education	-*		
Male education	+*	**	
Age	-*	**	
children younger than 5 years			
Children between 6-17 years		**	
Work hours spouse			
Household income	+*		***
Individual variation	95%**	95%**	95%**
Country variation	5%**	5%**	5%**

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