

Point: Don't Marry Career Women

By Michael Noer

How do women, careers and marriage mix? Not well, say social scientists.

Guys: a word of advice. Marry pretty women or ugly ones. Short ones or tall ones. Blondes or brunettes. Just, whatever you do, don't marry a woman with a career.

Why? Because if many social scientists are to be believed, you run a higher risk of having a rocky marriage. While everyone knows that marriage can be stressful, recent studies have found professional women are more likely to get divorced, more likely to cheat and less likely to have children. And if they do have kids, they are more likely to be unhappy about it. A recent study in *Social Forces*, a research journal, found that women--even those with a "feminist" outlook--are happier when their husband is the primary breadwinner.

Not a happy conclusion, especially given that many men, particularly successful men, are attracted to women with similar goals and aspirations. And why not? After all, your typical career girl is well educated, ambitious, informed and engaged. All seemingly good things, right? Sure ... at least until you get married. Then, to put it bluntly, the more successful she is, the more likely she is to grow dissatisfied with you. Sound familiar?

Many factors contribute to a stable marriage, including the marital status of your spouse's parents (folks with divorced parents are significantly more likely to get divorced themselves), age at first marriage, race, religious beliefs and socio-economic status. And, of course, many working women are indeed happily and fruitfully married--it's just that they are less likely to be so than nonworking women. And that, statistically speaking, is the rub.

To be clear, we're not talking about a high school dropout minding a cash register. For our purposes, a "career girl" has a university-level (or higher) education, works more than 35 hours a week outside the home and makes more than \$30,000 a year.

If a host of studies are to be believed, marrying these women is asking for trouble. If they quit their jobs and stay home with the kids, they will be unhappy (*Journal of Marriage and Family*, 2003). They will be unhappy if they make more money than you do (*Social Forces*, 2006). You will be unhappy if they make more money than you do (*Journal of Marriage and Family*, 2001). You will be more likely to fall ill (*American Journal of Sociology*). Even your house will be dirtier (*Institute for Social Research*).

Why? Well, despite the fact that the link between work, women and divorce rates is complex and controversial, much of the reasoning is based on a lot of economic theory and a bit of common sense. In classic economics, a marriage is, at least in part, an exercise in labor specialization. Traditionally, men have tended to do "market" or paid work outside the home, and women have tended to do "nonmarket" or household work, including raising children. All of the work must get done by somebody, and this pairing, regardless of who is in the home and who is outside the home, accomplishes that goal.

Nobel laureate Gary S. Becker argued that when the labor specialization in a marriage decreases--if, for example, both spouses have careers--the overall value of the marriage is lower for both partners because less of the total needed work is getting done, making life harder for both partners and divorce more likely. And, indeed, empirical studies have concluded just that.

In 2004, John H. Johnson examined data from the Survey of Income and Program Participation and concluded that gender has a significant influence on the relationship between work hours and increases in the probability of divorce. Women's work hours consistently increase divorce, whereas increases in men's work hours often have no statistical effect. "I also find that the incidence in divorce is far higher in couples where both spouses are working than in couples where only one spouse is employed," Johnson says. A few other studies, which have focused on employment (as opposed to working hours), have concluded that working outside the home actually increases marital stability, at least when the marriage is a happy one. But even in these studies, wives' employment does correlate positively to divorce rates, when the marriage is of "low marital quality."

The other reason a career can hurt a marriage will be obvious to anyone who has seen his or her mate run off with a co-worker: When your spouse works outside the home, chances increase that he or she will meet someone more likable than you. "The work environment provides a host of potential partners," researcher Adrian J. Blow reported in *The Journal of Marital and Family Therapy*, "and individuals frequently find themselves spending a great deal of time with these individuals."

There's more: According to a wide-ranging review of the published literature, highly educated people are more likely to have had extramarital sex (those with graduate degrees are 1.75 times more likely to have cheated than those with high school diplomas). Additionally, individuals who earn more than \$30,000 a year are more likely to cheat.

And if the cheating leads to divorce, you're really in trouble. Divorce has been positively correlated with higher rates of alcoholism, clinical depression and suicide. Other studies have associated divorce with increased rates of cancer, stroke, and sexually transmitted disease. Plus, divorce is financially devastating. According to one recent study on "Marriage and Divorce's Impact on Wealth," published in *The Journal of Sociology*, divorced people see their overall net worth drop an average of 77%.

So why not just stay single? Because, academically speaking, a solid marriage has a host of benefits beyond just individual "happiness." There are broader social and health implications as well. According to a 2004 paper titled "What Do Social Scientists Know About the Benefits of Marriage?," marriage is positively associated with "better outcomes for children under most circumstances" and higher earnings for adult men, and "being married and being in a satisfying marriage are positively associated with health and negatively associated with mortality." In other words, a good marriage is associated with a higher income, a longer, healthier life and better-adjusted kids.

A word of caution, though: As with any social scientific study, it's important not to

confuse correlation with causation. In other words, just because married folks are healthier than single people, it doesn't mean that marriage is causing the health gains. It could just be that healthier people are more likely to be married.