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# Housewives' Self-Esteem and their Husbands' Success: The Myth of Vicarious Involvement\*

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*This study tests the common assertion that women, especially upper middle-class housewives, vicariously experience their husbands' success. Our findings for 121 mostly upper middle-class housewives disprove this assertion. Husbands' success does positively affect a housewife's self-esteem, but only indirectly, through its effect on perceived marital success. Only husband's income has a direct positive effect on self-esteem, while other successes of the husband actually lower her self-esteem. These findings, made more dramatic by a comparison with professional married women for whom none of the above effects appear, demonstrate the ambiguous impact traditional marriage has on women. Since marriage is traditionally a basis for a woman's identity, successful marriage increases her feelings of worth. However, the specific role arrangements may reduce her feelings of personal competence.*

Marriage can increase a woman's general happiness (Glenn, 1975); at the same time, however, it can increase her susceptibility to certain types of mental illness (Bernard, 1972; Gove, 1972). Glenn (1975) tried to reconcile this disparity by arguing that both the satisfactions and the stresses of marriage (potentially orthogonal) were higher for women than for men. Marital roles are important sources of identity for women (Mulford and Salisbury, 1964), so being successfully married should increase a

woman's happiness (Glenn, 1975) and her self-esteem. However, the specific role requirements of marriage also may produce stress (Bernard, 1972, 1975), thereby reducing a woman's self-esteem.

## *Vicarious Success and Happiness*

Traditionally limited to homemaking, women have had no direct access to many important societal rewards (Scanzoni, 1972). Women supposedly have remedied this deficiency by experiencing their husbands' success—vicariously—as their own. Of particular importance is indirect participation in the husband's career. Wives of high-status men often report that they give their husbands support, interest, and attention. They provide social contacts away from work, which help maintain their husbands' status, and they engage in public performances that reflect favorably on their husbands. They also make formal and informal intellectual contributions to their husbands' careers (Helfrich, 1965; Pahl and Pahl, 1970; Lopata, 1971; Papanek, 1973). If a woman's

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traditional dependence extends beyond career involvement (see, *e.g.*, Rossi, 1964; Epstein, 1970), then any kind of success (or desirable characteristic) that her husband has will reflect favorably upon her and increase her feelings of worth.

By these arguments women are not evaluated on their own merits, but on how their activities contribute to the success of their husbands. Indeed, a woman's husband must be successful before her own efforts are even considered.

### *Vicarious Success as Debilitating*

Recently, several researchers have questioned whether or not a woman can experience her husband's success vicariously. Papanek (1973) argued that a husband's income is the only reward a wife can share, since she can actually possess this reward. She can use this reward to engage in certain behaviors (*i.e.*, making consumer purchases) which increase her status among her peers. All other rewards (or successes) can be experienced directly by the husband alone (for the most part) and tend to reflect *indirectly* on the wife (for having such a desirable or successful husband). Indeed, this dependence on her husband for success may reduce a wife's feelings of worth, especially if she is well educated and, presumably, able to earn her own rewards. While a married woman may devise ways of converting her husband's status into her own (*e.g.*, serving on a hospital board), her general powerlessness and lack of control over the course of her life may increase her level of psychological disturbance (Gove, 1972; Bernard, 1975). Certainly, powerlessness can reduce a person's sense of competence in dealing with life situations, which is an important dimension of self-esteem (Franks and Marolla, 1976). Thus, the relative lack of independent achievement combined with close attention to a husband's success, may lower a housewife's self-esteem.

### *A Model*

It is possible to reconcile the positive and negative effects. A successful and, hence, desirable husband should enhance a woman's estimate that her marriage will last and be successful. If traditional women want to believe that they have married successfully, then women who believe they have a successful marriage should also think well of

themselves. That is, a husband's success may have a *positive* effect on his wife's self-esteem because it is mediated by her estimate of her marriage's success. Yet the very same qualities in a husband simultaneously may elicit negative self-regard from his wife because they generate an unfavorable comparison. Hence, Bernard (1972) may have asserted correctly (Glenn's, 1975, dismissal, notwithstanding) that for women, a traditional marriage involves a certain amount of "irrationality." We hypothesize that, for housewives, a husband's success contributes positively to her perception of the marriage's success and thus, in turn, enhances her level of self-esteem. At the same time, the comparison has a direct, negative effect on her self-esteem.

Our analysis focuses primarily on unemployed housewives, but we do identical analyses on data for married professional women to show that the hypothesized effects are *not* general to all women—only those whose major experience of success is vicarious.

## METHODS

### *Sample*

The data for this study are on 121 housewives who were not employed outside the home. They were part of a stratified sample of 2,013 persons drawn from the more than 60,000 persons who responded to a 1973 questionnaire sent to readers of *Psychology Today*. Because vicarious career involvement is supposedly most prevalent among wives of higher-status men and this sample overrepresents middle- and upper-income families, the data are well suited to our hypotheses. To enhance the representativeness of the sample in other ways, the 2,013 cases were stratified on the basis of sex and age to approximate the distribution of the population in 1960. Thus, the sample contains 50 percent females; within each sex, 45 percent are 24 years of age or younger, 25 percent are between 25 and 44, and 31 percent are 45 years old or older. The stratification permits a more representative distribution across variables than would the original sample; nevertheless, we make no claims for the generalizability of our results to the U.S. population as a whole.

The professional women used for comparison purposes are the 75 married women among the 2,103 who held jobs that required professional degrees (*e.g.*, doctors, lawyers,

professors), who were managers and administrators, or who were "other professionals" (e.g., writers, artists).

### Measures

*Self-esteem* was measured by a subset of seven items from the Janis-Field Feelings of Inadequacy Scale (Eagle, 1967).<sup>1</sup> For this sample the internal consistency reliability (Cronbach, 1951) is estimated to be .80. This figure compares favorably with split-half reliabilities of .72 and .80 reported by Eagle in two studies (Eagle, 1967, 1969). The scale contains general measures of esteem and specific measures of perceived social adequacy. A sense of competence in dealing with life situations is an important dimension of self-esteem (White, 1963; Franks and Marolla, 1976). Because competent management of social interactions is important to many social endeavors, a sense of social adequacy probably will generalize to other areas of life, making this a valid measure of self-esteem.

*Marital success* was measured by asking, "How certain are you that you will be with your partner ten years from now?"<sup>2</sup> While some marriages may last because one or both partners feel trapped in them (for various reasons), individuals with emotionally satisfying marriages are likely to anticipate marriages of longer duration. Thus, the item has reasonable validity.

*Husband's success* was measured by his occupational prestige,<sup>3</sup> income,<sup>4</sup> and physical

<sup>1</sup>The items were: (1) How often do you dislike yourself? (2) When you talk in front of a class or group of persons of your own age, how apprehensive do you usually feel? (3) How often do you feel self-conscious? (4) How sure of yourself do you feel among strangers? (5) How often do you worry about how well you get along with other persons? (6) How often do you feel that you have handled yourself well at a social gathering? (7) How uncomfortable are you when you start conversations with persons you don't know?

Five responses, ranging from "very much" to "not at all," were possible for each item.

<sup>2</sup>Respondents were given five choices: very certain, somewhat certain, somewhat uncertain, very uncertain, and we will not be together.

<sup>3</sup>Occupational prestige ranged from 1 to 6, depending upon which of six occupational categories was appropriate (professionals; female-dominated professionals—nurses, school teachers, social workers; other professionals—clergymen, artists-writers; managers and administrators; secretaries and clerical workers; technical workers and craftsmen). These categories were ranked ac-

tractiveness.<sup>5</sup> The first two items indicate the husband's career success. The third item is an indicator of more general desirability from which traditional wives might derive reflected esteem. Also, physical attractiveness has a demonstrated relationship to occupational and social success (Dion *et al.*, 1972; Goldman and Lewis, 1977) and to interpersonal attraction (Berschied and Walster, 1974). Thus, highly attractive men are likely to be prized as potential spouses. They also are more likely to provide their wives with vicarious success and negative comparisons. According to our hypotheses, all three measures should increase perceived marital success; all except income should lower a woman's self-esteem.

*Control variables* are the respondents' self-rated physical attractiveness<sup>6</sup> and intelligence.<sup>7</sup> Physical attractiveness and intelligence are two of a woman's most important resources. Also, there is some evidence that females exchange physical attractiveness for higher socioeconomic status (Elder, 1969; Berscheid, *et al.*, 1973). Thus, intelligent, attractive women are likely to have successful, attractive husbands and high self-esteem because they are attractive and intelligent. Since we wanted to determine the independent effect of *husbands'* characteristics on self-esteem, we controlled for the confounding effects from the *wife's* attractiveness and

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ording to the average prestige rating of specific occupations within the broad categories. When a husband's occupation was not included in the categories, we assigned a prestige score from a regression equation obtained by regressing occupational prestige on income for the other respondents.

<sup>4</sup>Respondents were asked to indicate which of ten categories represented their husband's annual income. The lowest category was less than \$1,000; the highest was more than \$40,000.

<sup>5</sup>Husband's physical attractiveness was measured by asking the respondent to rate her spouse as compared to herself. The five answer choices ranged from "much more attractive than I" to "much less attractive than I."

<sup>6</sup>This item asked the respondent to rate her overall attractiveness in comparison with others of the same age. The seven possible responses ranged from "much more attractive" to "much less attractive."

<sup>7</sup>The question was: "Compared to the average person, I consider myself generally more intelligent. The six possible responses ranged from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree."

TABLE 1. HOUSEWIVES [N = 121]: ZERO-ORDER CORRELATIONS BETWEEN ALL VARIABLES, MEANS, AND STANDARD DEVIATIONS

		1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Mean	Standard Deviation
Self-Esteem	(1)	1.00	.26	.25	.12	-.23	.14	.25	22.83	5.32
Marital Success	(2)		1.00	.09	.23	.18	.11	.06	4.28	1.05
Husband's Income	(3)			1.00	.46	-.12	.14	.29	5.30	2.36
Husband's Prestige	(4)				1.00	-.03	.34	.24	3.55	1.16
Husband's Physical Attractiveness	(5)					1.00	.00	-.26	3.17	0.89
Own Intelligence	(6)						1.00	.14	4.69	1.27
Own Physical Attractiveness	(7)							1.00	4.88	1.14

intelligence. Our goal of discerning the independent effect of husband's physical attractiveness is further complicated by the comparative nature of the husband's physical attractiveness measure (See Footnote 5). Hopefully, controlling for the wife's self-rated attractiveness will improve our estimate of this independent effect.

#### Analytic Procedures

We used regression and path analysis to assess the impact of husband's success and the controls on marital success, and of husband's success, marital success, and the controls on self-esteem. Of special interest were the indirect effect (through marital success) of husband's success on a woman's self-esteem and the direct effects of husband's success and marital success. We performed identical analyses (with the exception of an additional control for "own income") on data for higher-status professional women and men. We use data on professional women for comparison because they have the crucial ingredient that housewives lack: rewards obtained through their own occupational experiences. Comparing their results with those of housewives clarifies our interpretation of the findings for housewives. The use of subjective self-reports as independent variables, though mandated by the symbolic interactionists' emphasis on the subjective definition of the situation (the underlying theory for much of our reasoning), may be problematic. Specifically, spurious correlations with self-esteem may result. Women with low self-esteem may tend to over-rate all persons relative to themselves, including their husbands. In that case, we would obtain the expected results, but not because of the dynamics of the housewife's situation. However, the lack of such effects

among professional women would strengthen our argument that the results for housewives are substantively meaningful and not spurious.

## ANALYSIS

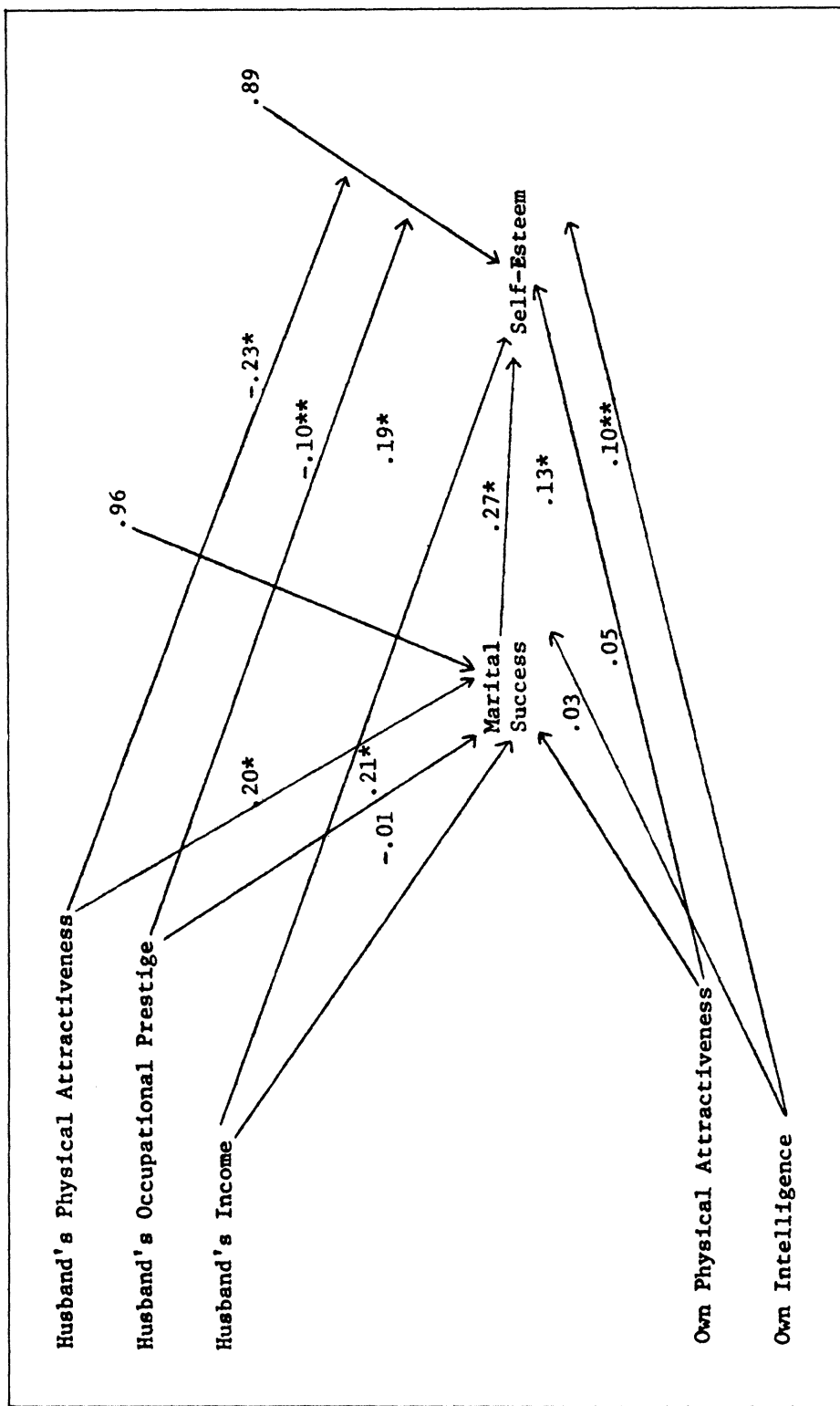
### Findings

Table 1 shows some evidence that being a traditional housewife is debilitating for women. Their mean level of self-esteem (22.83) is significantly lower ( $p < .01$ ) than that of the married professional men (24.0) and women (24.29) in the sample.

We used a path model to examine the determinants of self-esteem (see Figure 1). Table 2 shows the unstandardized coefficients for both housewives and married professional women. Figure 1 shows that for housewives, having a desirable husband contributes positively to self-esteem *indirectly* through its positive effect on marital success. In contrast, Table 2 shows that married professional women do not experience this indirect effect. Housewives with attractive, occupationally successful husbands predicted that their marriages would last longer than did women with less successful husbands. Interestingly, though, income has no independent role in this process; for housewives, apparently, only personal success or other desirable traits are important determinants of marital success. The strong, positive effect of marital success on self-esteem supports the argument that marriage can provide some satisfaction in the lives of women (Glenn, 1975; Glenn and Weaver, 1977).

As was also predicted, however, the same variables that increase self-esteem indirectly reduce it directly. Nonworking housewives with attractive, high-status husbands felt less adequate than married professional women even though the housewives intended to

FIGURE 1. PATH COEFFICIENTS FOR DETERMINANTS OF HOUSEWIVES' SELF-ESTEEM\*



\*Effects significant at the .05 level.  
 \*\*Effects significant at the .10 level.  
 Table 1 shows zero-order correlations.



TABLE 2. UNSTANDARDIZED REGRESSION COEFFICIENTS FOR DETERMINANTS OF SELF-ESTEEM AND MARITAL SUCCESS

Independent Variable	Housewives (N = 121)		Professional Women (N = 75)	
	Self-Esteem	Marital Success	Self-Esteem	Marital Success
Marital Success	1.38*	—	.15	—
<u>Husband's:</u>				
Physical Attraction	-1.36*	.24	-.31	.35*
Occupational Prestige	-.46	.19*	-.39	.10
Income	.43*	-.01	.13	-.01
<u>Wife's:</u>				
Physical Attraction	.60*	.06	1.31*	.09
Intelligence	.42	.03	.50	.17
R <sup>2</sup>	.20	.09	.15	.16

\*Denotes coefficients that were twice the size of their standard errors.

remain married.<sup>8</sup> Only the husband's income increased the woman's self-esteem (as predicted by Papanek, 1973). Perhaps, income is the only career reward received by a husband that a wife can always use to enhance her own status (for example, in making consumer purchases). Other rewards may be manipulated by some women to enhance their own status, but for the most part, the rewards indicated by husband's occupational prestige, at least, reduce the self-esteem of the housewives in this study.

The hypothesis of nonworking housewives' vulnerability to comparison effects is strengthened by the general absence of effects on the self-esteem of professional women (Table 2).<sup>9</sup> For them, the spouse's characteristics had no impact on self-esteem, either directly or indirectly.

These results support two common assertions. First, women traditionally are evaluated more on whom they associate with than on their own personal successes (Rossi, 1964; Epstein, 1970; Papanek, 1972). This assertion is supported by the strong effect of marital success on self-esteem, relative to the effect of desirable personal characteristics.<sup>10</sup> Furthermore, women want to remain married

<sup>8</sup>The effect of occupational prestige is just slightly below the criterion for significance, so it is more tenuous than the other findings; in a larger sample, however, it would have been significant.

<sup>9</sup>Unreported analyses also show that these effects are absent for several groups of employed men and women.

<sup>10</sup>We do not have direct measures of others' evaluations, only the woman's self-evaluations. However, the symbolic interaction framework, used heavily here, assumes that self-evaluations are based upon feedback received from significant others.

to desirable men, presumably because they realize (consciously or not) that their social worth partly depends on their having a desirable mate.<sup>11</sup> The more successful they are at maintaining the marriage, the better they feel about themselves.

Second, a housewife's lack of highly valued occupational successes makes her especially vulnerable to comparison effects. These findings suggest that, apart from her enhanced social standing as a successfully married woman, the husband's income is the only reward that a woman personally enjoys. Thus, a wife's vicarious success—the experiencing of a husband's success as her own—seems more myth than reality. These findings support earlier assertions that women are harmed when they cannot acquire social rewards by their own efforts (Bernard, 1972; Gove, 1972; Papanek, 1973) and also show one reason why: a husband's success makes a nonworking housewife feel *less* adequate in contrast.

These conclusions are strengthened by analysis of data on largely upper-middle class employed women who were not susceptible to the comparison effect, and who did not determine their own worth by their marital success. Future researchers must explore whether or not these findings characterize the entire population. The tendency for housewives to compare themselves unfavorably to their husbands may be true only of highly educated women who have a strong basis for expecting their own rewards. Our limited sample size prevents us from testing this possibility.

<sup>11</sup>Although professional women also reported greater success with attractive partners, this fact did not translate into an indirect effect on self-esteem.

Another possibility to be explored in future research is whether or not women's self-esteem will increase as employment rates for married women continue to rise. If married women increasingly engage in continuous, achievement-oriented work, then the number of women who are unemployed housewives will decrease and women who work may derive a secure sense of self-worth from their work. Ultimately, the debilitating nature of marriage for women may disappear, and women in general may develop higher levels of self-esteem.

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