The Happy Homemaker? Married Women’s Well-Being in Cross-National Perspective

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A long-standing debate questions whether homemakers or working wives are happier. Drawing on cross-national data for 28 countries, this research uses multi-level models to provide fresh evidence on this controversy. All things considered, homemakers are slightly happier than wives who work fulltime, but they have no advantage over part-time workers. The work status gap in happiness persists even controlling for family life mediators. Cross-level interactions between work status and macro-level variables suggest that country characteristics—GDP, social spending, women’s labor force participation, liberal gender ideology and public child care—ameliorate the disadvantage in happiness for full-time working wives compared to homemakers and part-time workers.

The significance of paid employment for women’s life satisfaction has been the subject of broad and sustained interest. The liberal feminists of the 19th century promoted female education in the belief that meaningful employment would liberate middle-class women from oppressive domesticity (Budig 2004). This theme was revisited by The Feminine Mystique in the mid-20th century when Betty Friedan (1963) pointed to the “problem that had no name,” women’s vague dissatisfaction with the stifling regimen of housewifery. Friedan challenged the ideology of gender specialization, which valorized the dichotomy of women’s homemaking and men’s breadwinning. In sociology, structural-functionalism offered an essentialist defense of gender specialization. Childbearing demanded that women play an expressive role within the home and left the instrumental leadership in the occupational system to men (Parsons and Bales 1956). To avoid status competition within marriage, wives who worked for pay pursued only casual employment—a “job,” not a career.

When married women’s labor force participation increased, more women achieved prestigious, highly paid and presumably meaningful careers (Blau, Ferber and Winkler 2006; Oppenheimer 1970). Contrary to the early feminists’ expectations, however, the general happiness of American and European women declined—at least as compared to men’s (Easterlin 2001; Stevenson and Wolfers 2009). Although this deterioration in women’s life satisfaction held across social and economic groups, the finding seemed to line up with the essentialist ideology which viewed the decline in gender specialization...
as problematic. Rejecting a male career model that denigrates women's traditional caring roles, both social conservatives and cultural feminists invoke gender differences to argue for the fulfillment to be had in tending home and family (Budig 2004). Despite the drudgery associated with stereotypically female work around the house, many women do, in fact, report personal gratification and meaning in the activities of caring for home and family (DeVault 1991; Robinson and Milkie 1998). Although essentialist arguments seem antiquated in the face of high female labor force participation (Boushey and O’Leary 2009), ambivalence about women’s employment persists, as evidenced by unsubstantiated claims that middle-class mothers are now opting out of paid work (Belkin 2003). Mothers who stay at home enjoy favorable media portrayals (Kuperberg and Stone 2008); working women report experiencing guilt in the face of cultural expectations for intensive mothering (Guendouzi 2006).

Drawing on cross-national survey data for 28 countries, this research examines the relationship of wives’ work status and their perceptions of the quality of their lives. Are homemakers happier than working women? If so, is this relationship dependent on mediating factors, such as the division of household labor? Does the relationship hold across countries? Or, do some countries have features that alter the gains to homemaking or buffer the strains of paid work? Our comparative, multi-level approach makes a unique contribution to understanding the personal implications of wives’ work and family roles. At the micro-level, the analysis introduces a model for employment and satisfaction incorporating likely mediator variables. At the macro-level, the analysis evaluates a theoretically-informed set of country-level variables hypothesized to condition the relation of work status and life satisfaction.

Background

What constitutes happiness is a long-standing philosophical question. Although the distribution of happiness, life satisfaction and subjective well-being has captured the attention of social scientists (Kohler, Behrman and Skytte 2005; Zimmermann and Easterlin 2006), there is a regrettable lack of consistency in concepts, measures and terminology. Following Veenhoven (2010), we can distinguish two components of the holistic appreciation of life. The cognitive or judgmental component captures the gap between what one wants in life and what one has, either in general or with respect to given domains such as work or family. A subjective, emotional component reflects transient, affective states (pleasant and unpleasant), which are linked to immediate experience and to personality (e.g., extraversion, neuroticism) (Diener 2006; Haller and Hadler 2005). Cognitive evaluations are important “quality of life” social indicators, especially in Europe, where country-to-country differences in perceived well-being have received serious study (Christoph and Noll 2003; Daly and Rose 2007). Following previous research, we emphasize a cognitively-oriented indicator.

Research has yet to resolve whether the relationship of women’s life satisfaction and their paid employment is positive or negative. Theoretically, homemaking has been described as rewarding not only by gender conservatives, but also by contemporary
feminists who champion the value of unpaid caring labor (Giele 1996). This contradicts the liberal feminist view of homemaking, which emphasizes the demoralizing aspects of domestic tedium and a restricted social role. As for paid work, there are arguments that women’s labor force participation undermines their life satisfaction and equally firm contentions that it promotes their well-being.

**Happy Homemakers**

Normative pressures and role conflicts are invoked as reasons that housewives will be happier. Social conservatives and cultural feminists hold that satisfaction comes from fulfilling traditional gender roles (Crompton and Lyonette 2005). In keeping with social comparison theory (Festinger 1954), a wife’s employment will erode her well-being if her paid work is out of step with the gender conventions of her social world. Public opinion still questions the advisability of married women’s paid work, at least full-time employment when children are preschoolers (Charles and Cech 2010; Treas and Widmer 2000). Furthermore, because of disproportionate responsibilities for the home, children and family (Gershuny 2000; Treas and Drobnic 2010), employed women are vulnerable to dissatisfaction arising from the stress of work-family conflict.

The time-bind literature describes the strain resulting from diminished time available to satisfy household demands (van der Lippe and Peters 2007). Mothers who report having insufficient time with loved ones have lower well-being than do others (Nomaguchi, Milkie and Bianchi 2005). Furthermore, there are work-to-home spillovers, such as fatigue and emotional upsets (Stevens, Minnotte, Mannon and Kiger 2007). Negative spillover is greater for dual-earner than single-earner couples (Benin and Neinstedt 1985). Time binds and spillovers may manifest in lower marital satisfaction, with likely implications for broader evaluations of well-being (Allen, Herst, Bruck and Sutton 2000).

**Happy Working Wives**

Beneficial aspects of employment suggest a positive association between women’s paid work and life satisfaction. Despite workplace disadvantages such as lower pay, women derive as much satisfaction from employment as men (Mueller and Kim 2008; Phelan 1994). Married women’s employment may enhance their happiness by increasing their economic resources, expanding their social networks and immersing them in a socially valued and personally fulfilling role. The “role expansion” hypothesis recognizes that multiple roles may have positive outcomes (Marks and MacDermid 1996; Sieber 1974). Under some circumstances, combining paid work and family life leads to new sources of satisfaction that outweigh any downside (Nordenmark 2002). As the “work-family enrichment” thesis notes, experiences in one role may improve performance or enjoyment in the other role (Greenhaus and Powell 2006; Hill 2005). A literature on “positive spillover” from work to home points to energized states and upbeat moods from the job (Stevens, Minnotte, Mannon and Kiger 2007).

Employment is a source of valuable social ties that generate social capital (Behtoui 2007). Unlike men, women cite co-workers as offering social support, which can buffer
stress (Morrison 2009; van Daalen, Sanders and Willemsen 2005). Employment also brings concrete rewards. Older women’s employment is not related to life satisfaction, but their resources and financial concerns are (Choi 2001). Although there is only a modest positive association between income and subjective well-being within countries (Diener and Biswas-Diener 2002), personal income is a resource that wives deploy in bargaining over housework (England and Farkas 1986) and money (Lundberg, Pollack and Wales 1997; Treas 1993). Longitudinal data show that increases in women’s income and in their contributions to family finances lead to increases in marital happiness and well-being (Rogers and DeBoer 2001).

Of course, paid work ranges from demanding full-time employment that exacerbates time conflicts to part-time work that offers many of the rewards of a job with less disruption to family life. Part-time workers in seven European countries were more satisfied with life than full-time workers (although this characterizes those who worked fewer hours to care for children or keep house, as opposed to those who were unable to find full-time jobs) (Michon 2007). It is important to distinguish homemakers from those not in the labor force due to unemployment, an experience leading to a major decrease in well-being (Andersen 2009; Winkelmann and Winkelmann 1998). Not having a job does not predict life satisfaction for the retired or disabled (van Campen and Cardol 2009).

Empirical Evidence on Employment and Happiness

There is no consensus on the relationship between women’s well-being and work status. Cross-sectional studies report that the well-being of U.S. homemakers is higher, lower and no different than working wives’ (Benin and Neinstedt 1985; Burke and Weir 1976; Campbell 1981; Ferree 1976; Kessler and McRae 1982; Miller, Moen and Dempster-McClain 1991; Stevenson and Wolfers 2009; Wright 1978). Differing measures (e.g., happiness, marital satisfaction, psychological distress) add to uncertainty in the literature. Although American women have lost ground to men in happiness since the 1970s, the trend is no different for employed women and those who are not employed (Stevenson and Wolfers 2009).

Cross-sectional data cannot show whether full-time homemakers are drawn disproportionately from the ranks of the happy (or unhappy). Speaking to selection bias, a German panel study reports a small, negative association between premarital happiness and paid work, suggesting that women who are more satisfied with life are attracted to homemaking (Stutzer 2006). Although U.S. panel data confirm that married women who move into full-time employment are less happy with their marriages than other wives, their work status change does not affect their evaluations of marital quality (Schoen, Rogers and Amato 2006). Australian women who shift into full-time employment, however, experience a decline in life satisfaction (Booth and van Ours 2009). Given such mixed results, a meta-analysis of longitudinal studies cautions against sweeping generalizations regarding differences in well-being between women who do and do not work for pay (Klumb 2004).
Without addressing the happy homemaker debate, recent cross-national research offers suggestive evidence. All things considered, housewives in one large study reported greater happiness, but not greater life satisfaction, than the employed (Haller and Hadler 2005). For 30 European countries, respondents in single-earner couples were less happy than their counterparts in dual-earner couples (Soons and Kalmijn 2009). The analysis did not determine whether the finding applies to men, women or both. Furthermore, the partner who was not working may have been unemployed or disabled, rather than being a full-time homemaker. While also silent on such distinctions, Boye’s (2009) study of 25 European countries finds longer work hours to be associated with greater well-being, although the relationship was not statistically significant when attitudes toward paid work and housework were controlled. Voluntary part-time workers in seven European countries, however, were more satisfied with life than full-time workers (Michon 2007).

Specifically addressing whether homemakers are happier, this article improves on the available cross-national results. It focuses exclusively on women to eliminate ambiguity about the sex of the non-employed partner, and it distinguishes homemakers from the unemployed and the disabled. By differentiating women employed fulltime and parttime, it speaks to time binds that may influence the relative well-being of women who work for pay. It also considers ways in which family factors may mediate the association between work status and happiness.

**Mediating Factors**

If employment influences happiness, other variables likely mediate the relationship. Wife’s employment adds to a family’s income, and income contributes modestly to life satisfaction (Ball and Chernova 2008; Mentzakis and Moro 2009). Research links wives’ employment to marital satisfaction via the household division of labor (Baxter 2000; Sanchez and Kane 1996; Stevens, Kiger and Riley 2001; Wilcox and Nock 2006). Particularly in wealthier nations such as those we consider, life satisfaction is positively associated with satisfaction with home life (Oishi, Diener, Lucas and Suh 1999). A meta-analysis finds that marital quality is a stronger influence on life satisfaction than vice versa (Proulx, Helms and Buehler 2007).

Paid work reduces the time women have for housework, but it offers bargaining resources to compel husbands to do more (Fuwa 2004). If husbands avoid routine housework, wives see the division of household labor as unfair, a judgment resulting in marital conflict, negative evaluations of marital quality and low well-being (Baxter 2000; Sanchez and Kane 1996; Stevens, Kiger and Riley 2001; Wilcox and Nock 2006). The wife’s hours of paid work are not as strong a predictor of marital quality and conflict as her satisfaction with the division of housework (Suitor 1991). If employment influences married life, and if married life colors evaluations of happiness, marital indicators may mediate between employment and satisfaction. Whether controls for family stress, marital conflicts, partners’ task sharing and fairness judgments eliminate any work status differences in wives’ happiness is an empirical question we address.
Prior research suggests additional correlates of life satisfaction, as seen in positive associations of happiness with age and education (Argyle 1999). Religiosity is positively, if weakly, related to life satisfaction (Bohnke 2005; Robinson and Martin 2008; Snoepe 2008). Gender egalitarian attitudes have been linked to greater well-being (Kaufman and Taniguchi 2006). For working mothers, children exacerbate perceptions of time deficits, which are linked to dissatisfaction (Nomaguchi, Milkie and Bianchi 2005). Children have complex effects, leading to lower well-being in poorer European countries but higher well-being in wealthier ones (Bohnke 2005).

Women’s Employment and Happiness in Cross-National Context

Country-to-country differences in life satisfaction are widely documented (Christoph and Noll 2003; Daly and Rose 2007). Beyond the micro-level predictors of well-being, the relation between women’s work status and happiness may depend on context. Working for pay is negatively and significantly associated with happiness for Japanese women, but there is no statistically significant relationship for their counterparts in the United States, where wives’ employment is more fully institutionalized (Lee and Ono 2008). In Germany, where the breadwinner-homemaker model is entrenched (Pfau-Effinger 2010), single-earner couples, who conform to this model, are happier than two-earner couples (Stutzer 2006). Women’s work may matter less for well-being in wealthier countries where happiness is not so dependent on one’s own income (Bohnke 2005; Easterlin 1973) or where welfare policies buffer market inequalities (Clarke, Georgellis, Lucas and Diener 2004). Because life satisfaction is negatively associated with work-family conflict and perceived time pressure across countries (Bohnke 2005), a wife’s work status may matter less in countries with family-friendly policies (e.g., public child care) that help married women to reconcile work and family. Married women’s employment status may matter less for their well-being where public opinion is more favorable to maternal employment and where female labor force participation is common. At the macro-level, women’s well-being vis a vis men’s is positively associated with female labor force participation in countries where public opinion endorses gender equality, but negatively associated where gender inequality is tolerated (Tesch-Römer, Motel-Klingebiel and Tomasik 2008). Employment policies that raise the returns to paid work (e.g., affirmative action) may contribute to the satisfaction of working women, but not homemakers.

Hypotheses

Although we expect a link between the work status and happiness of married women, the direction of this relationship is unclear. Conflicts between work and family, as well as normative pressures favoring stereotypical gender roles, suggest that homemakers will be happier than working wives. Arguments that working women will be happier than homemakers focus on the benefits of employment, including role expansion, workplace social networks, earned income and personal fulfillment. Given earlier mixed results, a priori
expectations do not favor one argument over the other. Any influence of work status is likely mediated by other micro-level variables. Considering marital quality, couple conflict and family stress are expected to relate negatively to happiness. Family income, husband’s participation in housework and the wife’s assessment that the housework division is fair are hypothesized to relate positively. Of interest is whether work status is significantly related to happiness after controlling for these micro-level mediating mechanisms.

Country-level characteristics are argued to buffer work-family conflict and other work status influences on well-being. Confronted by economic pressures, women who prefer to stay home may have to work for pay, even at the cost of personal satisfaction. In affluent societies and states with generous welfare schemes, women are under less economic pressure; they may be happier because they are better able to realize their work preferences. Making family living standards less dependent on the wife’s work status, higher GDP and social welfare provisions will be associated with a narrower work status gap in happiness between homemakers and working women. By affording greater normative support to working wives, a liberal gender ideology will be associated with fewer work status differences in well-being. Where there are more working women, there will be more institutional accommodations (e.g., family-friendly policies) to reconcile work and family. Higher female labor force participation rates will be associated with smaller work status differences in happiness. Specifically, public child care, we hypothesize, will be linked to a weaker association of employment status (and employment hours) with happiness. Although some policies reduce the personal costs of full-time employment, others may affect women’s happiness by increasing the rewards of paid work. Designed to raise the economic returns to women’s employment, affirmative action policies will be linked positively to life satisfaction associated with paid work.

Data and Methods

To investigate the relationship of married women’s employment and well-being, this article draws on data from the 2002 Family and Gender module of the International Social Survey Program. Collected by independent research organizations, the data are representative of 28 populations: Australia, Austria, Belgium (Flanders), Chile, Cyprus, Czech Republic, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany (East and West), Great Britain, Hungary, Ireland, Israel, Japan, Latvia, Mexico, the Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Slovakia, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland and the United States. Analysis is limited to female respondents, 18-65, who were married or, following the conventions of a few countries, “living as married.” Given high levels of missing data for family income, country-specific means were imputed; an imputation flag controls for any effect of imputation. For other variables, respondents answering “don’t know,” refusing to respond, or giving no answer are excluded. The effective total sample size (unweighted) is 7,014. The country samples range from 66 in East Germany to 419 in Spain.

Our dependent variable is based on the item: “If you were to consider your life in general, how happy or unhappy would you say you are, on the whole?” Emphasizing a global assessment, this wording is closer to the cognitive component of well-being than
to its subjective, transient and emotion-laden component. Being less dependent on feeling states at the time of measurement (Lucas, Diener and Suh 1996), this cognitive variable is appropriate to study work status, because it maps to respondents’ general life conditions (Ehrhardt, Saris and Veenhoven 2000; Kohler, Behrman and Skythethe 2005). Given seven, reverse-coded response categories ranging from “completely unhappy” (1) to “completely happy” (7), we describe the variable in terms of “happiness.” Respondents from different cultures may interpret questions somewhat differently, but well-being, which emphasizes universal emotions and gratification of basic needs, is regarded as appropriate for cross-national research (Veenhoven 2010).

The key independent variable is the respondent’s work status. We consider four dummy variables: full-time worker (the reference category), part-time worker, homemaker (i.e., homemaker, helping family members, retired), and others not in the labor force (i.e., student, unemployed, disabled, others). Five mediating variables include family income and four measures tapping the couple relationship and home environment. Because family income was reported for different categories in different countries, we harmonize the data into six categories conforming to the distribution for Portugal, the country reporting the fewest categories (i.e., six). As the categories approximate a normal distribution, we treat family income as interval data with values from 1 to 6. To measure the division of household labor, the husband’s share of each task was averaged over five female-typed chores—cleaning, laundry, grocery shopping, meal preparation and caring for sick family members (Cronbach’s alpha = .76). Responses were recoded to range from 1 (always the woman) to 5 (always the man). Following (Batalova and Cohen 2002), the small numbers stating “done by a third person” are coded as “3” or “about equal.” A five-point scale measures the respondent’s assessment of the fairness of the division of household labor, ranging from “more than my fair share” (1) to “less than my fair share” (5). The marital conflict item asks how often respondents and their spouses disagree on the sharing of housework; responses range from never (1) to several times a week (5). Finally, a one-to-five point scale from a Likert item measures the degree of stress in the respondent’s home life.

Control variables include respondent’s age, age-squared, number of minor children in the household and education; the six-point scale of educational qualifications ranges from no formal qualifications (0) to university degree completed (5). Frequency of attendance at religious services ranges from never (0) to at least once a week (4). A scale measuring liberal gender ideology (Cronbach’s alpha = .73) is based on a factor analysis of Likert items on agreement with five statements: (1. A preschool child is likely to suffer if his or her mother works; (2. Family life suffers when the woman has a full-time job; (3. A job is all right, but what most women really want is a home and children; (4. Being a housewife is just as fulfilling as working for pay; (5. A man’s job is to earn money; a woman’s job is look after the home and family.

We consider country-level variables hypothesized to contribute to women’s subjective well-being and to interact with work status. Based on the data from the World Bank’s World Development Indicators (World Bank 2010), the International Monetary Fund’s
Government Finance Statistics Yearbooks (IMF 2004, 2005, 2006), and the International Labor Organization (2009, 2010), we evaluate 2002 GDP per capita (logged and measured with purchasing power parity), social protection welfare expenditures as a percent of GDP (includes spending on health but not housing and education; Mexico data from 2000), and labor force participation rates for women, ages 25-54. Public support for gender equality is gauged by the country’s mean score on the gender liberalism scale described above. Policy variables include the presence of affirmative action provisions which give women favored treatment in hiring and advancement (yes = 1, else = 0), as well as the percentage of children enrolled in public childcare (Fuwa and Cohen 2007).

Because the clustering of respondents within countries violates the OLS assumption of independent cases, we employ hierarchical linear modeling to test for the association of happiness with individual-level and country-level variables across 28 countries.

The individual-level model is:

\[ Y_{ij} = \beta_0 + \beta_1 X_{1ij} + \beta_2 X_{2ij} + \beta_3 X_{3ij} + \beta_k X_{ki} + R_{ij} \]

where \( Y_{ij} \) is the level of happiness reported by wife \( i \) in country \( j \), \( \beta_0 \) is the individual-level intercept. \( \beta_1, \beta_2, \text{ and } \beta_3 \) are the coefficients of dummy-coded work status categories: homemakers, part-time workers, and others not in the labor force (full-time workers are the omitted reference category). \( \beta_k X_{ki} \) are other individual-level predictors, including control variables (respondent’s age and age-squared, highest degree, the numbers of children in household, the frequency of attendance at religious services, gender attitude liberalism) as well as the mediating variables (family income, perceived fairness of the division of housework, husband’s household task-sharing, family stress and couple conflict over housework). \( R_{ij} \), the error term, is assumed to be normally distributed with mean zero and variance \( \sigma^2 \).

An example of the random-intercept, country-level model is:

\[
\begin{align*}
\beta_0 &= \gamma_{00} + \gamma_{01} GDP_j + U_{0j} \\
\beta_1 &= \gamma_{10} + \gamma_{11} GDP_j \\
\beta_2 &= \gamma_{20} + \gamma_{21} GDP_j \\
\beta_3 &= \gamma_{30} + \gamma_{31} GDP_j \\
\beta_k &= \gamma_k
\end{align*}
\]

where \( \gamma_{00} \) is the country-level intercept, and \( \gamma_{0j} \) represents the effect of logged GDP per capita (or another country-level variable) on the model intercept. The country-level intercepts for the slopes of the three dummy-coded work status categories are \( \gamma_{10}, \gamma_{20} \) and \( \gamma_{30} \). The effects of logged GDP per capita on \( \beta_1, \beta_2 \) and \( \beta_3 \) are \( \gamma_{11}, \gamma_{21} \), and \( \gamma_{31} \). The random effect at the country level is \( U_{0j} \). Except for dummy variables, all variables are centered at their grand means. An intercept may be interpreted as the level of happiness reported by a full-time working wife with average characteristics for the sample living in a country with average characteristics.
We also estimated random slope models, which are intuitively appealing if country-specific associations for work status and happiness differ. For random slope with random intercept models, the variance components for work status slopes were not statistically significant, arguing against country-to-country differences in work status associations. Given the relatively small number of countries and the many micro-level random coefficients, variation is partitioned into many small pieces, which works against statistical significance (Raudenbush and Bryk 2002). Random slope with fixed intercept models did show statistically significant variance components. We present only random intercept models, which yielded similar substantive results but better fit than the other two models.

Findings: Descriptive Statistics

Table 1 shows the descriptive statistics for the individual-level and country-level variables. On average, wives report being at least “fairly happy” (5.37 on the seven-point scale). In this sample, 41 percent of married women, 18-65, have full-time jobs, 19 percent are part-time workers, 30 percent are homemakers, and 10 percent are otherwise not in the labor force. Married women, on average, report “usually themselves”
to questions about who does female-typed household tasks and say that they do a bit more than their fair share of housework. Despite this assessment, wives report seldom disagreeing with their spouses about housework. On average, they neither agree nor disagree that family life is stressful.

**Individual-Level Results**

In Model 1, which considers only the wife’s work status, neither homemakers nor part-time workers differ significantly in happiness from full-time workers at the .05 level. (If homemakers are the reference category, homemakers and parttimers are not significantly different from one another either). Other women not in the labor force, such as the unemployed, do report slightly less happiness (p < .05) than full-time workers. After the control variables are added in Model 2, homemakers are significantly happier than their full-time working counterparts, but the differences are modest. Again, the difference between homemakers and part-time workers is not statistically significant. As for the control variables, Model 2 confirms that a woman’s age is negatively associated with her happiness, flattening off at older ages. Her education and frequency of attendance at religious services relate positively to well-being. Gender attitudes and the number of minor children in the household are not statistically significant.

Model 3 adds mediating variables. Expectedly, family income is positively and significantly (p < .001) associated with life satisfaction. The statistical non-significance of the flag indicates that imputation does not distort this result. The other mediating variables are statistically significant at the .01 level. The husband’s participation in household tasks and the wife’s favorable assessment of housework fairness are both positively associated with her happiness. Unsurprisingly, family stress and disagreements about housework have negative associations. These variables suggest some mechanisms by which employment might have an impact on the happiness of working women, but they do not eliminate the homemaker’s advantage in life satisfaction. With the mediating variables included, the happiness gap between full-time working women and homemakers, if anything, widens, as does the gap between full-time and part-time workers.

To ascertain the robustness of the association of happiness and work status, we re-estimated Model 3 using ordered logit models with robust standard errors (results not shown), which did not assume normality, linearity or equal distances between happiness response categories. This yielded the same work status results. Similarly, we substituted the woman’s number of hours of paid work for the work status categories. Consistent with our previous results, work hours proved to be negatively related to happiness at the .001 level. The finding is apparently robust, but the well-being disadvantage for full-time workers, while statistically significant, is not large. Based on Model 3, we can estimate predicted values of well-being for homemakers and fulltimers under the assumption that each group had the mean individual-level characteristics of the total sample. All things considered, the standardized mean difference in happiness scores between homemakers and fulltimers is only .11, indicating that homemakers enjoy only a small advantage.
Country-Level Results

When individual-level variables are held constant, homemakers are slightly happier than full-time working wives. It remains to be seen whether the unique characteristics of particular countries moderate or exacerbate this small gap in well-being. To evaluate whether country-level mechanisms affect the relationship between work status and happiness, we estimate multi-level models including macro-level variables. Based on the random-intercept models in Table 2, we know that there are country differences in the level of happiness, even when the individual-level independent variables are controlled. That is, the variance component of the between-country intercept differs significantly \((p < .001)\) from zero. In this research, we are not interested in explaining country-to-country differences in wives’ happiness. Rather, we are interested in country-level characteristics affecting the association of work status and happiness. Thus, we focus on a set of macro-level variables that may interact with work status to affect the differences in happiness between homemakers and working wives. For example, supportive public opinion may minimize perceived work-family conflict for working wives or social policies may raise the returns to their employment.

In Table 3, multi-level HLM models show the main effect of a given country-level characteristic and its interaction with the individual-level work status variables, controlling for individual-level variables. Six macro-level variables are included in six separate analyses. Because country-level variables are often highly correlated \((r = .77\) for GDP and gender ideology), we do not consider multiple macro-level variables and their interactions in a single model. Considering main effects, logged GDP per capita is significantly associated with greater happiness \((p < .05)\), but the other country-level variables are not statistically significant.

Turning to the cross-level interactions, social protection welfare expenditures, as predicted, are associated with homemakers’ diminished advantage in happiness compared to full-time working wives \((p < .001)\). The female labor force participation rate and public child care enrollment show marginally significant \((p < .1)\) interactions with work status, also implying a reduction in the happiness gap between homemakers and full-time workers. The other country-level characteristics do not affect the happiness gap between homemakers and full-time workers, but most do narrow the gap between wives who work full-time and those who work part-time.

For part-time working wives, there are several significant interactions. This suggests that an increase in logged GDP per capita, social spending, female labor force participation and gender ideology all narrow the happiness gap between part-time working wives and their full-time counterparts. Affirmative action policies and public child care enrollments do not interact significantly with part-time status, and none of the country-level characteristics interact significantly with the “other not in the labor force” status.

In sum, when only individual-level variables are controlled, homemakers and part-time working wives are happier than their full-time working counterparts. The same result emerges from OLS regressions (not shown) that replicate the individual-
Table 2: Random-intercept Models of General Life Happiness for Married Women

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Model 1</th>
<th>Model 2</th>
<th>Model 3</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Intercept</td>
<td>5.374***</td>
<td>5.356****</td>
<td>5.313***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(.039)</td>
<td>(.042)</td>
<td>(.040)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Respondent’s Work Status</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Homemaker</td>
<td>.011</td>
<td>.060*</td>
<td>.119***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(.033)</td>
<td>(.028)</td>
<td>(.030)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parttime</td>
<td>.024</td>
<td>.041</td>
<td>.089**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(.031)</td>
<td>(.030)</td>
<td>(.029)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Others not in labor force</td>
<td>-.085*</td>
<td>-.090**</td>
<td>-.027</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(.035)</td>
<td>(.030)</td>
<td>(.028)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fulltime (reference)</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Mediating Variable</td>
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<tr>
<td>Family income</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
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<td>(.010)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Family income flag</td>
<td></td>
<td>.047</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>(.036)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Housework fairness</td>
<td></td>
<td>.046**</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>(.013)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Task sharing</td>
<td></td>
<td>.094***</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>(.020)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family stress</td>
<td></td>
<td>-.116***</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>(.018)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Housework conflict</td>
<td></td>
<td>-.114***</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>(.018)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Control Variable</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Respondent’s age</td>
<td>-.058***</td>
<td>-.055***</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(.009)</td>
<td>(.009)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age squared</td>
<td>.001***</td>
<td>.000***</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(.000)</td>
<td>(.000)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of children</td>
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<td>.019</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(.017)</td>
<td>(.017)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Respondent’s highest degree</td>
<td>.042**</td>
<td>.018</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(.014)</td>
<td>(.010)</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Liberal gender ideology</td>
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<td>-.019</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(.012)</td>
<td>(.012)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Religious services attendance</td>
<td>.022*</td>
<td>.025*</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(.011)</td>
<td>(.011)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Variance Components</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Between-country intercept variance</td>
<td>.039***</td>
<td>.039***</td>
<td>.033***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(.197)</td>
<td>(.197)</td>
<td>(.181)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Within-country variance</td>
<td>.838</td>
<td>.818</td>
<td>.757</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(.915)</td>
<td>(.904)</td>
<td>(.870)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes: Significance levels (two-tailed): *p < .05   **p < .01   ***p < .001
Numbers in parentheses are standard errors.
Although small sample sizes within countries weigh against statistically significant results, no country showed full-time workers to be significantly happier than homemakers at the .05 level. As for the advantage of part-time over full-time workers, only Cyprus showed full-time workers to be significantly happier than their counterparts employed part-time. Although full-time employment may be a drag on married women's well-being, country characteristics do seem to reduce the happiness disadvantage which full-time working wives experience compared to homemakers and part-time workers.

Table 3: Cross-level Interaction Models of General Happiness: Married Women

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Logged GDP Per Capita</th>
<th>Social Spending % of GDP</th>
<th>Female Labor Force</th>
<th>Gender Ideology</th>
<th>Affirmative Action</th>
<th>Public Child Care</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Intercept</td>
<td>5.317***</td>
<td>5.310***</td>
<td>5.311***</td>
<td>5.313***</td>
<td>5.315***</td>
<td>5.312***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(.033)</td>
<td>(.039)</td>
<td>(.040)</td>
<td>(.039)</td>
<td>(.057)</td>
<td>(.040)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Main Effect</td>
<td>.256*</td>
<td>.002</td>
<td>-.003</td>
<td>.065</td>
<td>-.014</td>
<td>-.054</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(.107)</td>
<td>(.005)</td>
<td>(.002)</td>
<td>(.069)</td>
<td>(.064)</td>
<td>(.083)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interaction Effect</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Homemaker</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intercept</td>
<td>.115***</td>
<td>.105***</td>
<td>.111***</td>
<td>.127***</td>
<td>.103**</td>
<td>.109**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(.029)</td>
<td>(.025)</td>
<td>(.029)</td>
<td>(.029)</td>
<td>(.037)</td>
<td>(.031)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cross-level interaction</td>
<td>-.064</td>
<td>-.014***</td>
<td>-.004+</td>
<td>.042</td>
<td>.063</td>
<td>-.205+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(.062)</td>
<td>(.004)</td>
<td>(.002)</td>
<td>(.071)</td>
<td>(.056)</td>
<td>(.107)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parttime</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intercept</td>
<td>.092**</td>
<td>.090***</td>
<td>.083**</td>
<td>.098***</td>
<td>.080*</td>
<td>.092**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(.027)</td>
<td>(.024)</td>
<td>(.026)</td>
<td>(.026)</td>
<td>(.039)</td>
<td>(.029)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cross-level interaction</td>
<td>-.118*</td>
<td>-.011***</td>
<td>-.005**</td>
<td>-.118**</td>
<td>.029</td>
<td>-.080</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(.053)</td>
<td>(.004)</td>
<td>(.002)</td>
<td>(.039)</td>
<td>(.057)</td>
<td>(.086)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Others Not in Labor Force</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intercept</td>
<td>-.021</td>
<td>-.024</td>
<td>-.024</td>
<td>-.023</td>
<td>-.012</td>
<td>-.028</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(.029)</td>
<td>(.027)</td>
<td>(.028)</td>
<td>(.028)</td>
<td>(.034)</td>
<td>(.028)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cross-level interaction</td>
<td>.044</td>
<td>.001</td>
<td>.001</td>
<td>.051</td>
<td>-.048</td>
<td>.005</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(.048)</td>
<td>(.003)</td>
<td>(.001)</td>
<td>(.041)</td>
<td>(.041)</td>
<td>(.111)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Variance Components</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Between-country intercept variance</td>
<td>.024***</td>
<td>.031***</td>
<td>.031***</td>
<td>.032***</td>
<td>.033***</td>
<td>.031***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(.155)</td>
<td>(.177)</td>
<td>(.175)</td>
<td>(.178)</td>
<td>(.183)</td>
<td>(.177)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Within-country variance</td>
<td>.756</td>
<td>.755</td>
<td>.756</td>
<td>.756</td>
<td>.756</td>
<td>.756</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(.870)</td>
<td>(.869)</td>
<td>(.870)</td>
<td>(.870)</td>
<td>(.870)</td>
<td>(.870)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
part-time workers. Per capita GDP, social spending, female labor force participation and liberal societal gender ideology are all associated with a narrower gap between the happiness of wives who work fulltime and those who work parttime. Social expenditures (and perhaps female labor force participation and public child care enrollments) are associated with a diminished happiness advantage for homemakers over full-time working wives. As these results suggest, societal factors that help to ease work-family conflict or decouple living standards from wife’s work status may improve the relative happiness of full-time working women.

Conclusion

Across 28 countries, the analyses find a small, but statistically significant and robust, happiness advantage for homemakers compared to full-time working wives. With homemakers holding their own, Betty Friedan’s (1963) notion that homemaking is quiet death finds no support today (as opposed perhaps to the 1960s when disgruntled housewives had fewer alternatives to domesticity). The homemaker advantage, however, is too modest to sustain any social conservative or cultural feminist assertion that homemakers reap extraordinary joys from conforming to stereotypical gender roles. Nor do the results suggest the realization of the liberal feminist hope that women would find personal fulfillment in paid work. If women’s employment is more plentiful and meaningful than in the past, then full-time careerists may be trapped on a “hedonic treadmill” (Brickman and Campbell 1971) of rising expectations that depress their happiness. Although women working parttime do not face the intense time binds of full-time workers, they are no happier than homemakers—a finding that also cautions against equating employment with satisfaction. That full-time workers are less happy than other women is consistent with the cultural ambivalence regarding mothers’ employment. Although financial pressures dictate full-time paid work for many mothers, they live with a media valorization of stay-at-home moms (Kuperberg and Stone 2008) as well as with cultural expectations for intensive mothering (Hays 1996) which are at odds with long work hours.

All things considered, homemakers are slightly happier, full-time workers are slightly less happy, and parttimers are much like homemakers. Indeed, this gap between homemakers and full-time workers holds whether we consider work status or hours of paid work. Both theory and prior research suggest that work status will affect happiness by way of its influence on family life. A number of mediating variables—family income, husband’s household task sharing, the perceived fairness of the division of household labor, couple
conflict and family stress—are significantly related to married women's happiness. Controlling for these mediating variables, however, exacerbates rather than eliminates the homemaker's happiness advantage.

Our cross-national analyses offer evidence from random-effect, country-specific and cross-level interaction models. Country-level characteristics matter for happiness and suggest institutional mechanisms linking employment and well-being. Country characteristics register through cross-level interactions that reduce the net disadvantage for full-time working wives, particularly as compared to part-time workers. Being a full-time worker interacts significantly with higher social spending to move her level of happiness closer to the homemaker's. Being a part-time worker interacts significantly with country-level social spending, GDP, female labor force participation rates and liberal gender ideology to narrow the happiness gap between wives working longer and shorter hours. Presumably, generous welfare benefits mean that family living standards depend less on the number of hours women work for pay. Being less compelled to work by economic necessity, women's happiness may benefit from their ability to align their labor supply more closely with their needs and preferences. In countries with a liberal gender ideology or higher female labor force participation, greater accommodation of wives' full-time employment may mitigate some disadvantages associated with working longer hours. Public child care is one accommodation reducing some of the burdens confronting full-time working wives. Affirmative action policies to raise the rewards to women's employment do not show a similar result, however.

As previously demonstrated for income and happiness (Graham, Chattopadhyay and Picon 2010), different measures, different countries or different data might yield different results. There are other, more nuanced measures of societal context and public policies available for various countries (e.g., Ray, Gornick and Schmitt 2010). Our findings, however, are reasonably consistent with the findings from other recent cross-national studies of life satisfaction and work status, which do consider different measures, data and countries (Boye 2009; Haller and Hadler 2005; Michon 2007; Soons and Kalmijn 2009). While not exhaustive, our battery of country-level characteristics covers a range of cultural, structural and policy considerations. Our results are suggestive and encourage future efforts to understand what about countries makes women's full-time employment a more or less satisfying experience.

As the results from prior research are inconclusive, we cannot eliminate the possibility that differences in married women's happiness derive from their selection into the different work statuses. Happier women may opt to keep house fulltime. Disgruntled wives may need or want to work fulltime. Cross-level interactions argue against attributing all work status differences to selection effects. One can imagine public child care addressing the full-time working wife's time-bind without affecting any general predisposition to be dissatisfied with life. Within the constraints of the data, we treat selection in a limited way by controlling for education, one prior variable known to be associated with happiness. Controls for mediating variables (e.g., family income, family stress) discount the possibility that women's full-time
employment only captures the distress of having a “low quality” husband—one whose inadequate breadwinning compels her full-time job.

Perhaps the greatest limitation of this study is our lack of data on working conditions, which could reveal more about the rewards of the job as well as any job features that buffer work-family stress. The liberal feminists emphasized meaningful employment outside the home. Equating meaningful work with full-time employment is not fully responsive to their argument. It is reasonable to conclude that the happiness differences between full-time and part-time workers relate in some way to hours of work. Yet, we cannot discount the possibility that life satisfaction is determined by other work characteristics distinguishing part-time from full-time jobs (e.g., irregular shifts, supervisory responsibility, self-employment) or by differential returns to part-time and full-time employment (e.g., job satisfaction, social capital). As work hours increase, job fit—the match between job characteristics and worker preferences—is even more important to positive assessments of daily experiences (Harter and Raksha 2010). Domain-specific reports, say, for marital satisfaction, might clarify the origins of any work status differences in global happiness. Another fruitful area for research is the evaluative processes by which women in different circumstances come to define and report themselves as happy with their lives.

References


