

The Romantic Life of Brainiacs

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College-educated, highly successful women have long had a reputation for marrying less (and having lousier sex). But in a historic reversal of past trends, these women now triumph in matrimony. A marriage historian explains.



(Illustration by Jo Tyler)

By STEPHANIE COONTZ | February 18, 2007

Pity the overschooled old maid and the lonely career woman. Highly educated or high-achieving women are less likely to marry and have children than other women. If they do marry, they are more likely to divorce. Even if they don't divorce, their marriages will be less happy. And, oh, yes, they'll be sexually frustrated, too.

These maxims, widely accepted for at least two centuries, are bad news for a state so focused on brainy pursuits. Thirty-five percent of Massachusetts women 25 and older have a bachelor's degree or more, a level of educational attainment almost 10 points higher than the national average. So perhaps it follows that 28 percent of women in the state have never been married. Massachusetts's proportion of never-married females is the third highest in the nation, topped only by the District of Columbia and the state of New York. But are these women really educating themselves out of the marriage market? If a woman reads Proust or computes calculus, is she unable to attract a mate?

Conventional wisdom says the answer to both questions is yes. But a close look at the historical transformation of marriage in America suggests that educated women now have a surprising advantage when it comes to matrimony.

WHEN I WAS IN THE FIFTH GRADE IN 1954, my teacher pulled me aside after a class party to give me some friendly advice. "Stephanie," he said, "the boys would like you more if you didn't use such big words." I still remember his exact words, because they came as such a shock. Until that moment, it had never occurred to me that the boys might not like me. My teacher's advice didn't stop me from using big words or aspiring to academic success. I entered the citywide spelling bee that spring and was more upset by coming in second than I had been by my teacher's warning. But while my disappointment at losing the spelling bee quickly faded, the teacher's words stuck in my head. For the next 20 years, I believed that the things I most liked to do and most wanted to be made me less attractive to men.

I certainly wasn't the first girl to grow up thinking that aspiring to higher education or a fulfilling career meant jeopardizing her chance of marriage, motherhood, and personal happiness. As early as 1778, according to Harvard University historian Nancy F. Cott, author of the 2000 book *Public Vows: A History of Marriage and the Nation*, Abigail Adams complained to her husband, John, about the fashion of ridiculing female learning. In 1838, a prominent marriage adviser labeled intellectual women "mental hermaphrodites," less capable of loving a man or bearing a child than a "true" woman. In 1873, Dr. Edward H. Clarke, a prominent professor at Harvard Medical School, noted that the rigors of higher education diverted blood from a woman's uterus to her brain, making her irritable and infertile. Women who pursued careers, he warned, had little chance of marrying and even less chance of bearing a healthy child. Early in the next century, another doctor asserted that when women saw themselves as competent in school or at work, they acquired a "self-assertive, independent character, which renders it impossible to love, honor, and obey." In consequence, he complained, middle- and upper-class males were forced to remain single or dip into the lower classes to find an "uneducated wife" who would not scorn to perform the duties of her sex.

But such thinking isn't just a relic from an earlier time. New York City economist Sylvia Ann Hewlett made virtually the same point in her 2002 book *Creating a Life: Professional Women and the Quest for Children*, writing that "the more successful the woman, the less likely it is she will find a husband or bear a child." Maureen Dowd seems to think this is still the case, lamenting in her 2005 book *Are Men Necessary? When Sexes Collide* that she would have done better at landing a man if she had become a maid rather than a high-powered New York Times columnist. Or as a forbes.com writer put it in an August 22, 2006, column directed at men: "Don't marry a woman with a career." She won't look up to you, warned author Michael Noer; she won't be happy in marriage; and she might even cheat on you.

The main reason that educated and high-achieving women have trouble finding or keeping mates, according to observers past and present, is that they won't play dumb enough to assuage a man's ego or act submissive enough to put up with unfair treatment. In the late 19th century, the British philosopher Herbert Spencer worried that women who stepped out of the domestic sphere would lose the evolutionary advantage conferred by their ability to conceal the "antagonism" created by men's "ill-treatment" of them. This ability to hide resentment, he believed, had previously ensured women's survival. Fast

forward to 2007. W. Bradford Wilcox and Steven L. Nock, sociologists at the University of Virginia in Charlottesville, write in next month's issue of the journal *Sociological Forum* that women with husbands who earn more than they do have happier marriages in part because - unlike feminist-minded women - they view their husbands "through rose-colored lenses." In the authors' view, nontraditional women are less ready to create a "family myth" that the division of housework is fair. Unable to conceal the animosity produced by their perception of unfairness, they cause their husbands to emotionally disengage.

The flip side of the dire warnings aimed at educated or high-achieving women is an astonishing contempt for men, whose egos are deemed too fragile to handle an egalitarian relationship. Educated, high-achieving men get hit from two sides. Social scientists claim they won't accept an equal for a wife. But for a century or more, popular culture has portrayed educated men as nerds who aren't studly enough to sexually satisfy a woman. Noted sex researcher Alfred Kinsey perpetuated this myth in the 1950s, says Robert Nye, a historian of sexuality at Oregon State University in Corvallis, when Kinsey concluded from thousands of interviews that, on the whole, educated middle-class men were far too sexually repressed to satisfy their wives. The notion that a woman needs a cowboy or gardener to unleash her sexuality has been a staple of soap operas ever since.

Quite a dilemma. A man needs to feel intellectually superior to a woman to express his virility. But a woman can't find sexual fulfillment with an intellectual man. So what's an educated woman to do? Even if she finds an educated, high-achieving man secure enough to accept her as an equal, he'll be too uptight to satisfy her.

THE MYTH OF THE BITTER, sexually unsatisfied female college graduate has never been true. Surveys from the 1890s to the present reveal that college-educated women have always been at least as satisfied with their emotional and sexual lives as their less-educated counterparts. But until recently, it was true that women who completed the highest levels of education or landed high-status, high-paying jobs were less likely than other women to marry and have children. They were often perfectly happy with their choices, but the fact remains that many women did have to choose between family life and achievement in the public sphere.

One reason for this was that men of the past were more interested in marrying someone who would cook or clean for them than in an intellectual equal. In 2001, University of Texas psychologist David M. Buss and colleagues compared mate preferences based on national surveys taken for several decades beginning in 1939. Their research, published in the *Journal of Marriage and Family*, found that in 1956, education and intelligence ranked 11th among the things men desired in a mate. The respondents were more attracted to someone who was a good cook and housekeeper, had a pleasing disposition, and was refined and neat. By 1967, education and intelligence had moved up only one place, to number 10, and still counted for less than being a good cook or displaying neatness and refinement.

Another reason for the lower marriage rates of educated women was the fact, still true today, that women tend to postpone marriage while they acquire higher education or establish themselves in a career. And back in the 1950s, a marriage postponed was often a marriage forgone. In 1960, the median age of marriage for women was just 20. Half of all women married before they left their teens, and a woman who was still single at the ripe old age of 24 had much less chance of ever marrying than a single woman that age today. She was what the Japanese called "Christmas Cake," unlikely to find a buyer after the 25th. If she had a graduate degree, her chances of marriage were particularly slim. As late as the 1980s, women with PhDs or the equivalent were significantly less likely to marry than women with high school degrees.

But all this has changed in the past 25 years. For one thing, the age at which people marry has risen considerably. The median age for a first marriage nationally is now 25.5 for women and 27 for men. It is even higher for those with graduate degrees. In Massachusetts, the median age at first marriage is 27.2 for women and 29.2 for men. The state's high proportion of never-married individuals (the country's third highest) primarily reflects the fact that Massachusetts residents marry at an older age - not that they will never marry.

In fact, educated women nationwide now have a better chance of marrying, especially at an older age, than other women. In a historic reversal of past trends - one that is good news for young girls who like to use big words - college graduates and high-earning women are now more likely to marry than women with less education and lower earnings, although they are older when they do so. Even women with PhDs no longer face a "success penalty" in their nuptial prospects. It might feel that way in their 20s, when women with advanced degrees marry at a lower rate than other women the same age. But by their 30s, women with advanced degrees catch up, marrying at a higher rate than their same-aged counterparts with less education.

The same holds for high-earning women. Economist Heather Boushey of the Center for Economic and Policy Research in Washington, D.C., found that women between the ages of 28 and 35 who work full time and earn more than \$55,000 a year or who have a graduate or professional degree are just as likely to be married as other working women of the same age. And among women aged 30 to 44 who earn more than \$100,000 a year, 88 percent are married, compared with 82 percent of other women in the same age range.

Despite the many scare stories aimed at educated black women, this is one area in which the usual double jeopardy of being black and female does not apply. True, educated black women are less likely to marry than their white counterparts, reflecting the fact that marriage rates among African-Americans are, in general, lower than marriage rates of whites. But having an advanced degree is not an additional impediment to a black woman's chance of marriage. In fact, says economist Elaina Rose of the University of Washington in Seattle, there is now a "success premium" for highly educated black women, who are more likely to get married and also more likely to stay married than other black women. Fewer than 50 percent of African-American women with a high

school education are married, compared with more than 55 percent of African-American women with 19 years of school.

All women with PhDs are still slightly less likely to have children than other women, but the difference has been shrinking rapidly. And high-achieving women in general are as likely as other married working women to have children, although, again, they often do so at an older age.

ONE REASON EDUCATED WOMEN are more likely to marry today than in the past is that modern men are less threatened by equality and more interested in finding a mate who can share the burdens of breadwinning. Many studies show that men now want a wife who is at a similar educational or occupational level. The 2001 *Journal of Marriage and Family* paper found that in mate-preference surveys taken in 1985 and 1996, intelligence and education had moved up to number 5 on men's list of desirable qualities in a mate in both surveys, ahead of good looks. Meanwhile, the desire for a good cook and housekeeper had dropped to 14th place in both surveys, near the bottom of the 18-point scale. And in choosing a spouse, males with a college degree rate good looks much lower in importance than do high school graduates. "In a high-achieving man's definition of an A-list woman, the A increasingly stands for 'accomplished,'" says Deborah Siegel, former director of special projects at the National Council for Research on Women, in New York, and coauthor of the forthcoming book *Sisterhood, Interrupted: From Radical Women to Grrls Gone Wild*.

Furthermore, college-educated couples have lower divorce rates than any other educational group. And in the last 30 years, while the marriages of less-educated women became less stable, the marriages of college-educated women became more stable. College graduates are more likely to have egalitarian ideas about sharing housework and breadwinning, and recent research shows that egalitarian ideas and behaviors improve marital satisfaction for both men and women.

Highly educated women are more likely to work outside the home than less-educated women, even after they become mothers. In the past, employed wives tended to divorce at higher rates than non-employed wives, not because working harmed the marriage, but because women who worked had more options to leave a bad marriage. But just last year, a study discovered that wives' full-time employment is now associated with increased marital stability.

So the doomsayers are wrong. Educated men and women are more likely to marry and less likely to divorce than others. And guess what? They have better sex lives, too. According to sociologist Virginia Rutter of Framingham State College, surveys show that educated couples engage in more variety in their sex lives. They are, for example, more likely to participate in oral sex, and educated women are more likely to receive oral sex as well as perform it. "Education breaks down gender taboos that can be at the heart of a lot of sexual disappointments," notes Rutter, "and education helps men in particular to loosen up sexually." Educated husbands are also more likely to help with housework, which turns out to be a potent aphrodisiac. Psychologist John Gottman, professor

emeritus at the University of Washington in Seattle, found that when men do more housework, their wives are more likely to be "in the mood" for sex.

So what's left for the scaremongers who want us to believe that women's education and equality are messing up their prospects for happy marriages? It appears to be a variant of my fifth-grade teacher's advice to not use big words. Columnist Noer writes on forbes.com that if a wife outearns her husband, both will be unhappy. And pundits have seized on the work by sociologists Wilcox and Nock to suggest that wearing rose-colored lenses and maintaining a "family myth" of fairness will help women bolster their marriages more than trying to get husbands to share housework and child care. Today's advice to educated women seems to be, have a job if you want, but don't earn too much money or expect too much help at home.

Wrong, and wrong again. Psychologist Rosalind Barnett of Brandeis University and journalism professor Caryl Rivers of Boston University have found that 42 percent of college-educated married women who work outearn their partners, and their marriages are just as stable as those in which the husband makes more than his wife. In fact, Barnett's new study of dual-earner couples, based on data from the 1990s, found that as the wife worked more, the husband's view of the quality of his marriage actually improved. Surveys also show that the longer a woman holds a job, the more child care and housework her husband is likely to do, and that well-educated men have increased their housework more than less-educated ones.

How about the suggestion that women tamp down their expectations and create a "family myth" of fairness? That's one way to achieve family harmony. But another way is for men to actually do their fair share at home. Studies have shown that men whose attitudes become more egalitarian during their marriage report higher marital satisfaction, and so do their wives; they also have better sex lives and more socially aware children. Among couples with both partners in the workforce - the majority today - men and women who adopt less egalitarian ideas over the years become more psychologically anxious and depressed than their more progressive peers, according to an analysis of dual-earner couples conducted by Jacquelyn B. James, director of research for the Boston College Center for Work & Family.

It's true that when men don't live up to women's expectations of fairness, contemporary wives often become unhappy. And, as my mom's favorite T-shirt put it, "If mamma ain't happy, ain't nobody happy." But one of the biggest predictors that a marriage will be stable and happy, according to Gottman, the psychologist, is if a husband responds positively when his wife expresses a desire for change. It helps if she asks nicely. But it doesn't help if she avoids the issue and lets her discontent simmer.

Modern couples have more to negotiate than couples in the past, and that sometimes leads to conflict. But healthy conflict is often the way to marital growth. And besides, there's always make-up sex - at which college-educated couples no doubt excel.

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