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Church Doctrine: Effects on the Self-Worth of Married Women

Mary Claire Kondro

This study examines if married women who attend churches that teach patriarchal marriage roles have lower self-esteem than married women who attend churches that teach egalitarianism in marriage. Forty participants from two churches were administered the Contingencies of Self-Worth Survey (Crocker, 2003). Although the difference in self-esteem between the two groups was not found to be statistically significant, this study brought to light several issues that could be better controlled in a large-scale study in the future.

Religiosity has been positively correlated with many psychological and physical health benefits including self-esteem after trauma (Reiland & Lauterbach, 2008), satisfaction with overall life (Mansfield et al., 2008), and even increased fertility (Zhang, 2008). Marriage, likewise, has been shown to promote self-esteem, lower depression, and decrease alcohol and substance abuse in former users (Frech & Williams, 2007). However, religiosity has also been positively correlated with unhealthy guilt (Albertsen, O'Connor, & Berry, 2006; Maltby, 2005) and negative coping responses (Bjorck, 2007). Certain types of gender roles in marriage, including patriarchy, appear to also have their drawbacks. Moxnes, in Thagaard (1997), noted that "women's self-worth is being threatened in marriages which are characterized by male dominance" (p. 361) and found that women in patriarchal (traditional) marriages have lower self-esteem than women in nontraditional marriages.

Self-worth is defined as "the sense of one's own value or worth as a person; self-esteem; self-respect" (<http://www.dictionary.com/>). In the Contingencies of Self-Worth Scale, which is used in this study, Crocker (2003) further dismantles self-worth into components of family

support, competition, appearance, God's love, academic competence, virtue, and approval from others. Egalitarianism can be understood as "affirming, promoting, or characterized by belief in equal political, economic, social, and civil rights for all people" (<http://www.dictionary.com/>). In this study, egalitarianism refers specifically to equality in marriage. Patriarchy, finally, is defined as "a form of social organization in which the father is the supreme authority in the family, clan, or tribe" (<http://www.dictionary.com/>).

Patriarchal marriage roles are often found in various Christian denominations due to a literal interpretation of Scriptures that refer to the husband as the head of the household and command wives to be submissive to their husbands. Some churches take this mandate to a more extreme level, believing women are commanded to be submissive because God created women as innately inferior to men. Pevey, Williams, and Ellison (1996) provide an example of this belief in their narrative study of the Southern Baptist Convention. They found that churches within this denomination believe and teach that because women are "first in sin and last in creation" (p. 174), God designed men to be superior and women to be inferior. Reuther (in Pevey et al.) offers this explanation for similar gender role attitudes advocated by religion:

Wives, along with children and servants, represent those ruled over and owned by the patriarchal class. They relate to man as he related to God. A symbolic hierarchy is set up: God-male-female. Women no longer stand in direct relation to God; they are connected to God secondarily, through the male (p. 174).

Morgan (1987) conducted a study to determine the relationship between religious devoutness and gender-role attitudes. Participants completed a sex-role attitude scale, gender role preference scale, religious commitment scale, self-esteem scale, and a personality-style scale. The results of this study revealed that as religious devoutness increased, belief in traditional or

patriarchal marriage roles increased. As belief in traditional marriage roles increased, self-esteem decreased. Additionally, Morgan found that self-esteem increased if the wife worked outside the home for pay and overall self-esteem was higher in women who were in more nontraditional (egalitarian) marriages vs. traditional marriages.

Past research indicates that the type of marriage a woman is in – patriarchal or egalitarian—can affect her self-worth. The current study explores how self-esteem differs between women who are in egalitarian marriages advocated by their religious beliefs and women who are in patriarchal marriages advocated by their religious beliefs. Specifically, the hypothesis of this study is that married women who regularly attend churches which teach that women hold a subservient role to their husbands will score lower on a self-worth measure than married women who regularly attend churches that advocate egalitarianism in marriage. Participants from patriarchal and egalitarian churches were administered a self-worth survey in order to determine if there was a statistical difference in scores between the two groups.

Method

Participants

Forty-one married women participated in this study, 20 from Williams Temple in St. Louis, MO and 21 from St. Louis Family Church in Chesterfield, MO. One participant from Williams Temple chose to withdraw from the study due to the lengthiness of the questionnaire. The participants were married an average of 22 years ($SD=15$) and 90 percent of the participants were parents. All of the participants from St. Louis Family Church identified themselves and their husbands as regularly affiliated with the church (as opposed to just visiting the church), and all but one of the participants from Williams Temple identified themselves and their husbands as regularly affiliated with the church. The participant who did not affiliate with Williams Temple

affiliated herself with a denomination that has similar patriarchal marriage views. Unmarried women and widows were excluded from this study, as it was assumed that church doctrines on marriage roles would be most relevant to participants who were currently married.

Churches

The researcher was concerned that the churches involved not only strictly adhere to egalitarian and patriarchal doctrines, but also with ensuring that the participants were actually exposed to and aware of their church's doctrines regarding marriage. Elder Eric Kondro from Williams Temple (Church of God in Christ) confirmed that the church teaches that the husband is the head of the marriage. Williams Temple teaches that the wife is to be submissive to her husband and that women are not to hold positions of authority over men. They believe in the literal interpretation of Scriptures which state that women are to submit themselves to their husbands (Ephesians 5:22 and 1 Peter 3:1), that the fall of mankind in the Garden of Eden cursed women to be ruled over by their husbands (Genesis 3:16), and that women are not to usurp authority over men in church (1 Timothy 2:11-15). The question of whether the congregants were actually exposed to this teaching was answered in the Sunday school service which the researcher attended prior to collecting data. Here, the Sunday school lesson revolved around teaching a hierarchy of authority from God, to man, to woman. One of the contributors of the lesson stated that in a marriage, the wife can be compared to a body without a head. The husband makes up the head of that body, and, as stated by the same contributor, "Two heads on one body is a deformity. God does not make deformities." In other words, a husband and wife who held equal positions in a marriage would be dysfunctional and deformed. The women from Williams Temple who participated in the study were all exposed to this teaching prior to taking the surveys.

St. Louis Family Church (non-denominational) confirmed that they are completely egalitarian and they believe that the Scriptures mentioned above should be interpreted in light of cultural determinants. They believe that Jesus brought equality to all as evidenced by Galatians 3:28: "There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither bond nor free, there is neither male nor female: for you are all one in Christ Jesus" (New King James Version). Although the church does not regularly incorporate their views on marriage, specifically, into the regular Sunday services, Pastor John Moore, head of the Congregational Care Department, believes this is implicitly expressed by the fact that the church is jointly pastored by both a man and a woman. Additionally, the researcher has been present at services throughout a two year time frame, and has heard many teachings on the freedom and equality of all people through Christ. Although it was not as easy to ascertain that the congregants are actually exposed to the doctrines espoused by the church, Pastor Moore believes the lack of exposure to teachings about roles in marriage precludes the belief that a wife is to take an inferior role to her husband.

Materials

The Contingencies of Self-Worth Survey (Crocker, 2003, see Appendix A) was used to measure the participants' self-esteem. Questions from this scale examine components from domains such as family support, competition, appearance, God's love, academic competence, virtue, and approval from others. A demographic survey (see Appendix B) was also used to determine the number of years the participants had been married, if they were parents, and if they and their husbands regularly affiliated themselves with the church and denomination in which the study took place.

Procedure

The researcher contacted Williams Temple-Church of God in Christ and St. Louis Family Church and verified that these churches taught patriarchal and egalitarian roles in marriage, respectively. Participants at Williams Temple were requested by the pastor to participate in the study following the conclusion of the service, which the researcher attended. Women who were interested in participating met the researcher at the front of the building. The researcher explained that the purpose of the study was to compare self-esteem scores of married women across denominations. The participants filled out two informed consent forms (see Appendix C), the Contingencies of Self-Worth survey, and a demographic survey. They then received a feedback letter (see Appendix D) with the researcher's contact information and were thanked for their time and participation.

Due to the massive size of St. Louis Family Church (several thousand members) the pastor in charge of the Congregational Care Department asked several women in the church offices and congregation to participate in the study. Participants received typed explanations and instructions that were verbatim to the explanations and instructions given at Williams Temple. They filled out two informed consent forms, the Contingencies of Self-Worth survey, and the demographic survey. They retained one of the informed consent forms and the feedback letter and returned the materials to the Congregational Care Department. Additionally, the researcher attended a church service and recruited participants in the lobby. They received verbal instructions and followed the same procedure as all of the other participants.

Results

The hypothesis of this study was that married women who regularly attend churches which teach that women hold a subservient role to their husbands would score lower on a self-

worth measure than married women who regularly attend churches that advocate egalitarianism in marriage. An independent samples t-test revealed that there was not a statistically significant difference between the self-esteem scores of married women in a patriarchal church ($M=31.33$) and the self-esteem scores of married women in an egalitarian church ($M=33.6$), $t(38)= 1.581$, $p >.05$.

Discussion

Although the results of this study did not confirm the research hypothesis, the computed value was only .103 away from reaching the critical value. Several limitations in the study may have contributed to the lack of statistical significance. The first of these problems was the small sample size. The researcher originally planned to have a minimum of 100 participants, but a number of factors resulted in a sample size of only 40. First, although the researcher contacted over 18 churches, only 3 responded. The reason for the reluctance of churches to allow research to take place in their congregations would be an interesting avenue of research to explore in and of itself. This study was also constrained by time – considering that church services are typically held on Sundays, it was a limitation that data could only be gathered at one church per week, especially since the process of scheduling a visit took weeks in and of itself. Additionally, the Contingencies of Self-Worth survey was originally intended to measure the self-esteem of college students, and thus may not have been the best survey to use for the constructs the study was attempting to measure. Another limitation to consider is that participants may not have responded accurately due to the length of the survey or feeling rushed to exit the church building after the service.

Should this study be replicated in the future, it is recommended that researchers obtain a much larger sample size and allow extra time to account for potential non-replies from solicited

churches. Perhaps a measure could be designed relating specifically to self-worth in relation to marriage and religion. It would be beneficial to determine how often and to what extent participants are exposed to the respective marriage doctrines and what their feelings are about the marriage roles advocated by their churches. It might also be interesting to compare between age groups to see if traditional vs. modern views on marriage impacts self-esteem in relation to church doctrines about marriage. This topic is a worthwhile avenue of research to pursue further because self-esteem has been shown to be affected by patriarchy in previous studies and it would be beneficial if churches were somehow able to compensate for the impact of their doctrines on married women's lowered self-esteem without modifying their chosen religious beliefs.

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Appendix A – Contingencies of Self-Worth Scale

INSTRUCTIONS: Please respond to each of the following statements by circling your answer using the scale from "1 = Strongly disagree" to "7 = Strongly agree." If you haven't experienced the situation described in a particular statement, please answer how you think you would feel if that situation occurred.

		Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Disagree Somewhat	Neutral	Agree Somewhat	Agree	Strongly Agree
1.	When I think I look attractive, I feel good about myself.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
2.	My self-worth is based on God's love.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
3.	I feel worthwhile when I perform better than others on a task or skill.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
4.	My self-esteem is unrelated to how I feel about the way my body looks.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
5.	Doing something I know is wrong makes me lose my self-respect.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
6.	I don't care if other people have a negative opinion about me.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
7.	Knowing that my family members love me makes me feel good about myself.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
8.	I feel worthwhile when I have God's love.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
9.	I can't respect myself if others don't respect me.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
10.	My self-worth is not influenced by the quality of my relationships with my family members.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7

		Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Disagree Somewhat	Neutral	Agree Somewhat	Agree	Strongly Agree
11.	Whenever I follow my moral principles, my sense of self-respect gets a boost.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
12.	Knowing that I am better than others on a task raises my self-esteem.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
13.	My opinion about myself isn't tied to how well I do in school.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
14.	I couldn't respect myself if I didn't live up to a moral code.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
15.	I don't care what other people think of me.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
16.	When my family members are proud of me, my sense of self-worth increases.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
17.	My self-esteem is influenced by how attractive I think my face or facial features are.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
18.	My self-esteem would suffer if I didn't have God's love.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
19.	Doing well in school gives me a sense of self-respect.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
20.	Doing better than others gives me a sense of self-respect.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
21.	My sense of self-worth suffers whenever I think I don't look good.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
22.	I feel better about myself when I know I'm doing well academically.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
23.	What others think of me has no effect on what I think about myself.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7

		Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Disagree Somewhat	Neutral	Agree Somewhat	Agree	Strongly Agree
24.	When I don't feel loved by my family, my self-esteem goes down.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
25.	My self-worth is affected by how well I do when I am competing with others.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
26.	My self-esteem goes up when I feel that God loves me.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
27.	My self-esteem is influenced by my academic performance.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
28.	My self-esteem would suffer if I did something unethical.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
29.	It is important to my self-respect that I have a family that cares about me.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
30.	My self-esteem does not depend on whether or not I feel attractive.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
31.	When I think that I'm disobeying God, I feel bad about myself.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
32.	My self-worth is influenced by how well I do on competitive tasks.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
33.	I feel bad about myself whenever my academic performance is lacking.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
34.	My self-esteem depends on whether or not I follow my moral/ethical principles.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
35.	My self-esteem depends on the opinions others hold of me.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7

Appendix B

Demographic Survey

Please Circle Your Answer or Fill in the Blank

1. How many years have you been married?

2. Are you a parent or legal guardian of children of any age?
YES NO
3. Do you affiliate yourself with the denomination of the church you are currently attending?
YES NO
4. If no, what denomination do you affiliate yourself with?

5. Does your husband affiliate himself with the same denomination as you?
YES NO
6. If no, what denomination does your husband affiliate himself with?

7. Do you consider your husband to be the head of your household?
YES NO UNSURE

Appendix C

20

Informed Consent Form

I, _____ (print name), understand that I will be taking part in a research project that requires me to complete surveys asking about my demographic information and perceived self-worth. I understand that I should be able to complete this project within 20 minutes. I am aware that my participation in this study is strictly voluntary and that I may choose to withdraw from the study at any time without any penalty or prejudice. I should not incur any penalty or prejudice because I cannot complete the study. I understand that the information obtained from my responses will be analyzed only as part of aggregate data and that all identifying information obtained from my responses will be absent from the data in order to ensure anonymity. I am also aware that my responses will be kept confidential and that data obtained from this study will only be available for research and educational purposes. I understand that any questions I may have regarding this study shall be answered by the researcher involved to my satisfaction. I verify that I am currently legally married. I verify that I am at least 18 years of age and am legally able to give consent.

_____ (Signature of participant)

Date: _____

_____ (Signature of researcher obtaining consent)

Date: _____

Student Researcher's Name and Number:

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Appendix D

Feedback Letter

Thank you for participating in this study. The study was conducted in order to determine if the self-esteem scores of married women vary across church and denomination type.

Please note that I am not interested in your individual results; rather, I am only interested in the results of a large group of consumers, of which you are now a part. No identifying information about you will be associated with any of the findings.

If you have any questions or concerns regarding any portion of this study, please do not hesitate to bring them up now or in the future. My contact information is found at the bottom of this letter. If you are interested in obtaining a summary of the findings of this study at a later date, please contact me and I will make it available to you at the completion of this project.

Thank you again for your valuable contribution to this study.

Sincerely,

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