"She likes her work very much [but] will probably quit"
Husbands, wives and changing opinions on married women's work in the 1930s

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Many of the remarkable gains in American women's economic and social standing in the twentieth century were achieved after World War II, and with a rapidity that astounded contemporaries. Labor force participation among cohorts of married women who had completed childbearing increased dramatically in the 1950s, prefacing a rapid and prolonged rise in married women's labor force participation. Between 1950 and 2000, married women's labor force participation rates grew three fold from 0.2 to 0.6, with much of the increase occurring between 1950 and 1990 (Costa, 2000). The critical cohort that kick-started the rise in married women's work was born before 1920, came of age in the 1930s, and mostly completed their child rearing by 1950. Their role in the revolution was women's work is well known to contemporary (Cain, 1966, National Manpower Council, 1958) and historical (Goldin, 1990) scholars of women's work.

Why *this* generation went out to work in large numbers, and set the stage for their daughters and granddaughters to expect to work in later life has not been fully explored. This paper uses two unique datasets of interviews from the 1930s with women and men coming of age in that decade to show the antecedents of the rapid rise in labor force participation that occurred in the 1950s, providing new evidence on employment intentions after marriage for a critical cohort of American women. The paper provides new evidence that a significant change in intentions towards work after marriage was underway among a cohort born between 1900 and 1915.

Fifty percent of the high school and college-educated women who were interviewed in the mid- to late-1930s intended to work after marriage. While this appears low to twenty first century readers, it was many times higher than contemporaneous labor force participation rates for married women. At the time, 10.5% (1930) to 13.9% (1940) of American married women between the ages of 18 and 64 were in paid employment. Moreover, no sizeable and identifiable sub-group of married women had labor force participation rates of this magnitude. For example, 29% of black wives were in paid work, Forty percent of childless married women under 40 years of age living in large cities in 1940 were working, a significant jump from 30% in 1930.[1] Among the wives in large cities the better educated (high school completion or greater) had slightly higher participation rates (43% in 1940). Even among the groups of married women most likely to work, labor force participation rates were still below 50%. Contemporary commentators were aware of the ongoing rise in metropolitan women's labor force participation, and sometimes saw it as a potential harbinger of a significant change in women's roles in the aftermath of suffrage (Cott, 1987, La Follette, 1934).

Thus the intentions expressed by young women interviewed in the 1930s prefigured a highly significant change in labor force behavior. The cohort interviewed in the late 1930s can be aged forward, and their intended labor force behavior compared to the actual labor force participation rates of demographically similar women in the 1950s and 1960s. By the 1960s women similar to the cohort interviewed in the 1930s had labor force participations rates of around 50%, consistent with intentions expressed thirty years earlier. Thus, the paper argues that the post-World War II rise in married women's labor force participation, while a surprise to some contemporaries, was intended by the women

[1] Defined here as cities over 100,000 for consistency with census reports and other work on this topic.

who made the change. The roots of revolutionary change in women's attitudes to work may lie a generation earlier than scholars have appreciated.

The paper pushes back a generation the insight of recent scholars who have emphasized the importance of cohorts and generations in understanding change in women's economic roles. For example, Raquel Fernandez has shown that women have a greater chance of working if they are married to men whose mothers were more likely to work during World War II (Fernandez et al., 2004, Fernández, 2007). Early life experiences and observations altered men's and women's attitudes and intentions in later life. Similarly, according to Claudia Goldin, a slightly later generation—born in the 1940s and 1950s and coming of age in the 1960s and 1970s—were the first to accurately anticipate that they would work for much of their adult lives and educate themselves to achieve that. In 1968 just one-third of young women (16-21 years old) anticipated working at age 35. By 1980 four-fifths of young women anticipated working at age 35 (Goldin, 2006). Thus, Goldin argues that significant change in young women's attitudes to work occurred in the late 1960s and 1970s.

A generation earlier, however, researchers in the Chicago area conducted thousands of interviews with young men and women suggesting an earlier beginning to acceptance of married women's work. The first set of interviews used in the paper are from a group of factory workers at the Western Electric Plant in Cicero, Illinois interviewed between 1928 and 1932 as part of the Hawthorne experiments on worker attitudes and productivity (Roethlisberger and Dickson, 1939). While most of the data gathered in the Hawthorne experiments collected little information about respondents, one set of 500 interviews with demographic information was collected allowing us to examine how age, marital status, and work experience affected men's and women's view about working wives. This paper draws on a random sample of 305 interviews.[2] All interviews for the sample drawn were read in their entirety, and analyzed for their opinions about women's work. The interview method was non-directive: respondents raised issues of their own accord and were not prompted to discuss any particular issues. At the time the interviews were conducted the firm was debating furloughs of married women. Many respondents would have been aware of the issue, and a quarter raised the issue with the interviewer.

The second set of interviews were collected between 1932 and 1942 by University of Chicago sociologist Ernest Burgess as part of a series of longitudinal studies of engagement and marriage (Burgess and Cottrell, 1939, Burgess and Wallin, 1953). All of the interview schedules and transcripts from interviews with approximately 1500 engaged (and then married) couples are preserved at the University of Chicago library. Having photographed all interview manuscripts, this paper draws on the entire sample, and appears to be the first systematic use of this source since the original research team. In contrast to the Hawthorne interviews, most of the Burgess data consists of structured data (see sample images, Figure 1 - 3), and the sample was better educated.

Using different methods and drawing on different populations, the Hawthorne and Burgess samples provide the best and most detailed evidence on public opinion about married women's work before World War II. Both show that when pressed, many Americans were conflicted about married women's work. In the Hawthorne interviews, respondents criticized people socially distant from themselves, and accepted and rationalized the behavior of people close to them. Other respondents expressed discomfort with married women working because they believed that married women took jobs away from men with families to support, but then went onto add that it was unfair to fire married who were productive or long-serving employees. In short, workers interviewed at

[2] Harvard Business School library policies did not allow personal digital photography of the collection, making it infesiable to collect a larger sample at the time of data collection.

Hawthorne recognized that married women at work were individuals with due process rights, and that dismissal merely for being married could be unethical.

The Burgess interviews show even more direct evidence of conflict about wives working. Approximately one in ten men asked if they were comfortable with their wife working ticked both "Yes" and "No" responses. While half the women interviewed intended to work after marriage, only a third of men thought their wife would work, so that many couples had directly conflicting intentions. Some men were frank enough to admit the ambiguity: "I don't want her to [work]. I doubt if she wants to. She might say that she does." Men interviewed in the Burgess samples were also asked how they would resolve conflicts if she wanted to work and he didn't want her to. Only a handful of the men thought they would control their wives' actions. The majority of men either wished the conflict away—"she will probably quit"—or said they would acquiesce to their wives—"if she insists [I] will let her work a little at first." Indeed, one man annotated his survey with the rhetorical question "how could I stop her?"

Among modern readers the question may elicit a wry smile on the nature of marriage. But in the 1930s women's ability to be independent economic actors was not fully established either legally (Matheson, 1926) or culturally. Women's economic gains in the late twentieth century depended on their own intentions changing, and more men believing they could not stop her. The Burgess and Hawthorne interviews analyzed here show the roots of that revolution in the 1930s.

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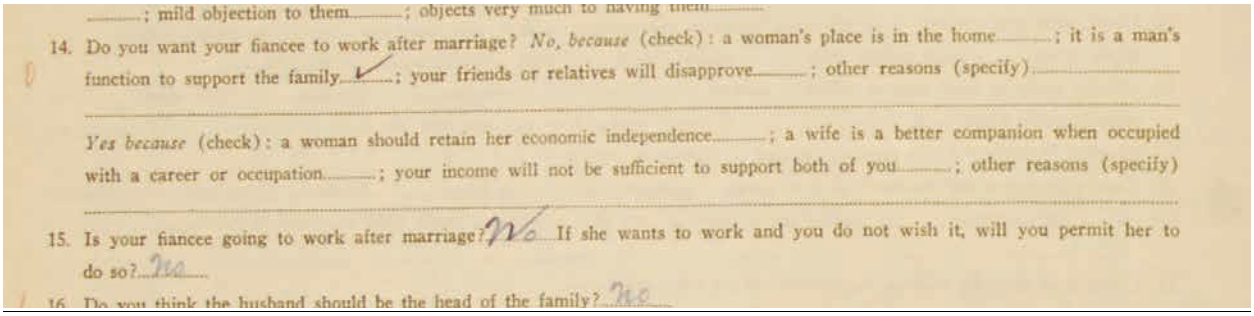
Examples of questions from Burgess marriage studies

Figure 1. Questions from 1936-1938 survey of engaged couples



.....; mild objection to them.....; objects very much to having them.....

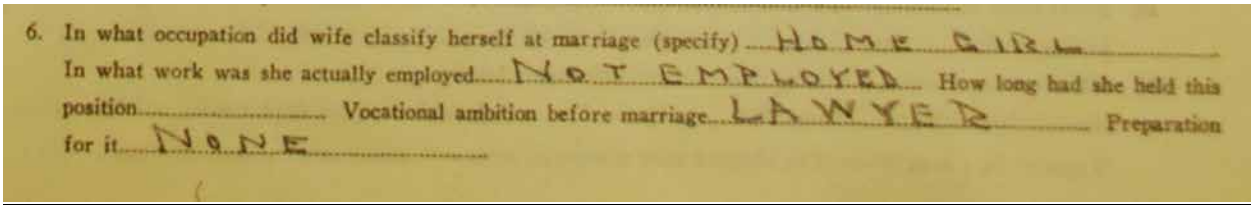
14. Do you want your fiancee to work after marriage? *No, because* (check): a woman's place is in the home.....; it is a man's function to support the family.....✓; your friends or relatives will disapprove.....; other reasons (specify).....

Yes because (check): a woman should retain her economic independence.....; a wife is a better companion when occupied with a career or occupation.....; your income will not be sufficient to support both of you.....; other reasons (specify)

15. Is your fiancee going to work after marriage? No If she wants to work and you do not wish it, will you permit her to do so? No

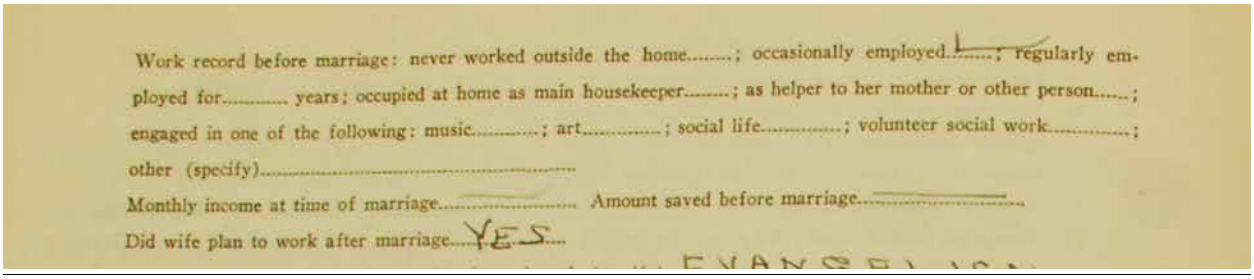
16. Do you think the husband should be the head of the family? No

Figure 2. Questions from 1931-1932 survey of married couples on work history and vocational intentions



6. In what occupation did wife classify herself at marriage (specify) HOME GIRL
In what work was she actually employed NOT EMPLOYED How long had she held this position..... Vocational ambition before marriage LAWYER Preparation for it NONE

Figure 3. Questions from 1931-1932 survey of married couples on work history and labor force participation intentions



Work record before marriage: never worked outside the home.....; occasionally employed ✓; regularly employed for..... years; occupied at home as main housekeeper.....; as helper to her mother or other person.....; engaged in one of the following: music.....; art.....; social life.....; volunteer social work.....; other (specify).....

Monthly income at time of marriage..... Amount saved before marriage.....

Did wife plan to work after marriage YES