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The emotional terrain of parenting and marriage: Emotion work and marital satisfaction[☆]

Krista Lynn Minnotte^{a,*}, Daphne Pedersen^a, Susan E. Mannon^b

^a *Department of Sociology, University of North Dakota, Grand Forks, ND, USA*

^b *Department of Sociology, Utah State University, Logan, UT, USA*

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Abstract

This study examines how the division of labor surrounding emotion work relates to the marital satisfaction of husbands and wives. The analysis is performed on data from a random sample of couples with at least one child from a northern city in a western state ($N = 96$ couples). Results suggest that for both husbands and wives the emotion work received from and performed for their spouse is significantly and positively related to marital satisfaction. Results also suggest that the marital satisfaction of husbands is enhanced when they are involved in performing emotion work for children, but if their levels of emotion work for children begin to approach or exceed that of their wives then their marital satisfaction tends to decline. Implications of the study are discussed.

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The institution of marriage has undergone significant changes during the 20th century in USA. One chief transformation has been the growing focus on emotional expression in marriages and families (Bianchi, Robinson, & Milkie, 2006; Cherlin, 2004; Wilcox & Nock, 2006, 2007). Indeed, marriage and family are increasingly viewed as institutions in which both partners should experience emotional fulfillment and attend to the emotional needs of each other and children (Cherlin, 2004; Wilcox & Nock, 2006, 2007). Feminist scholars, however, have

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* Corresponding author at: University of North Dakota, Department of Sociology, Gillette Hall Room 202, 225 Centennial Drive Stop 7136, Grand Forks, ND 58202-7136, USA. Tel.: +1 701 777 4419; fax: +1 701 777 4767.

E-mail addresses: krista.minnotte@und.edu, kminnotte@yahoo.com (K.L. Minnotte).

called attention to the amount of work involved in emotional caretaking, and have argued for the expansion of the concept of domestic labor to include this form of work (Coverman, 1989; Daniels, 1987). Accordingly, scholarship has begun to examine the antecedents of emotion work along with the marital ramifications of inequality in the division of emotion work (author citations, Duncombe & Marsden, 1995; Erickson, 1993). Several studies have demonstrated that men's emotion work in marriage tends to enhance the marital quality of women and that when women perceive inequalities in this form of labor it negatively impacts their marital quality and relationship satisfaction (Erickson, 1993; Duncombe & Marsden, 1993, 1995; Wilcox & Nock, 2006). Far fewer studies have considered how the division of emotion work within the home impacts men's marital satisfaction (author citation). Moreover, little scholarly attention has been devoted to examining how the division of labor surrounding the emotion work for children shapes marital satisfaction. Given these lacunae in the empirical literature, we examine how the division of emotion work, including emotion work performed by spouses for each other and for children, within families is related to the marital satisfaction of wives and husbands.

In particular, this study focuses on the performance of emotion work, which refers to providing support and encouragement to others thereby enhancing the self-esteem and well-being of the recipients of this labor (author citation; Erickson, 1993; Hochschild, 1983; Hochschild & Machung, 1989; James, 1989). By examining the division of emotion work in support of both husbands, wives, and children, we hope to shed further light on the marital satisfaction of spouses operating in a socio-historical context that highlights the importance of emotional sustenance in family life (Bianchi et al., 2006; Cherlin, 2004; Wilcox & Nock, 2006, 2007). We argue that in this context, with its intense focus on emotional fulfillment, we cannot fully understand marital satisfaction without considering the division of labor related to emotion work. We examine these relationships with data from randomly selected couples from a northern city in a western state ($N = 96$ couples).

1. Emotion work and marital satisfaction

1.1. Receiving and performing emotion work and marital satisfaction

Emotion work was conceptualized in Hochschild's (1983) *The Managed Heart*. Hochschild wrote, "I use the term *emotional labor* to mean the management of feelings to create a publicly observable facial and bodily display; emotional labor is sold for a wage and therefore has *exchange value* (1983, p. 7)." These same actions performed in private contexts, such as the home, were referred to as emotion work. The initial definition proposed by Hochschild focused on the management of one's own emotions, whereas future research tended to emphasize emotion work as involving the provision of support and encouragement to others (author citation; Erickson, 1993; Hochschild, 1983; Hochschild & Machung, 1989; James, 1989). Despite the fact that this labor is essential to the maintenance of family relationships (Daniels, 1987; DeVault, 1999; Duncombe & Marsden, 1993; James, 1989), emotion work has been largely invisible and ignored in many studies of family life. This has led scholars to highlight the salience of emotion work, and to call for its inclusion in studies pertaining to family relationships (Coverman, 1989; Erickson, 1993, 2005).

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