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Psychology of Women Quarterly 2011 35: 547 originally published online 14 October 2011

DOI: 10.1177/0361684311417402

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Psychology of Women Quarterly
35(4) 547-557
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DOI: 10.1177/0361684311417402
<http://pwq.sagepub.com>


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Abstract

How does a modern woman react to being defined by the role of wife? In our study, the authors examined the experiences, benefits, and challenges encountered by wives of college and university presidents. In a relationship where the husband has a prestigious and well-defined role, the female partner may still be expected to play a traditional role on a regular basis, bringing both benefits and challenges. Through focus groups, interviews, and a survey, women shared their experiences. Cluster analytic techniques identified six groups of women that were involved in, adjusted to, or conflicted by serving in the presidential spouse role. The authors employ the voices of the women themselves to illuminate their experiences, satisfactions, challenges, and frustrations. Wives indicated that they had to deal with loss of privacy, conflicted personal relationships, and increased ambiguity about their own identity. Interestingly, wives did not allow these challenges to undermine their marriage; instead, for those who had difficulty meeting these demands, the loss was to their own sense of self-worth. The results suggest that the role of presidential wife should be examined through the intersectional lens of gender and class. This intersection can be seen to shape the expectations of the wife herself, as well as the demands made by her spouse and others in her community. Her previous experiences, education, and career preparation provide insights into how she approaches the public role. Recognizing and giving voice to the complex sociocultural issues involved may help wives thrive in their roles as a college or university president's wife. *Additional online materials for this article are available to PWQ subscribers on PWQ's website at <http://pwq.sagepub.com/supplemental>*

Keywords

sex roles, social class, role expectations, role satisfaction, well being, occupational adjustment, social identity, organizational climate

You should go out everyday and enjoy yourself . . . Trouble comes soon enough . . . knowing full well by experience that power and high position do not ensure a bed of roses.

—Mary Todd Lincoln

You have to do what your husband wants you to do. My life revolves around my husband. His life is my life . . . his work is so important.

—Jacqueline Kennedy

The role of the First Lady is whatever the First Lady wants it to be.

—Laura Bush

The majority of women accept or adopt the role of spouse for at least some part of their adult lives. In traditional Western cultures, the role of “wife” was once well defined as homemaker and caretaker of house, husband, and children, whereas the husband was the breadwinner, often detached

from household affairs. Yet over the past century we have witnessed a major shift to dual-career homes, shared family responsibilities, and increasingly single-family housing. More women want and/or are expected to have their own careers, and yet they are still expected to maintain the traditional domestic role. Given the changes over the past few decades in social structures, economic contexts, employment opportunities, and social norms, society is still developing a clear understanding of what role expectations for husbands

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and wives should be, where the new boundaries are, and what key issues exist for married women.

How does a modern woman react to being defined by the role of wife? Questions about how to maintain one's identity while operating in a partnership, to balance personal needs while meeting family responsibilities, and to sustain connections in a highly mobile society regularly arise for women across ethnic groups and social classes. Whereas feminist research has most often focused on middle-class White women (Reid, 1993; Reid & Kelly, 1994), few studies have examined the specific role of wife, especially those with a high-status spouse. We believe that there are particular issues and challenges faced by women with prominent spouses (e.g., presidents, chancellors, and other public leaders) who are regularly expected to portray the traditional female role within a society that increasingly expects women to create their own paths (Daniels, 1991). Researchers who have focused on women with prestige have usually studied those who have accomplished success in their own right (e.g., Hulbert & Schuster, 1993). Instead, we incorporate the voices of women themselves to examine the experiences and challenges of the role of wife in the lives of women who have attained their status from association with their husband's prestige, with a particular focus on wives of college and university presidents.

Evolution of the "Wife" Role

Traditionally, the "wife" role prescribed a set of behaviors and expectations for a woman; the prescription varied to some extent by social class status, but all wives were held responsible for domestic duties and for the competent management of the family home, hearth, and children. Recent decades have eroded these expectations considerably, but not entirely. Women employed full-time still take responsibility for more housework and more child care than do their husbands (Dempsey, 2002). Even though women with significant economic resources who employ nannies and housekeepers do less of the actual work themselves, they are still expected to oversee all that transpires within the household domain (Stier & Lewin-Epstein, 2000).

Various investigators have examined factors affecting marital relationships, dual careers, and married women's employment issues, along with societal shifts that have occurred over the past 40 years (e.g., Haring, Hewitt, & Flett, 2003; Wilkie, Ferree, & Ratcliff, 1998; Zuo & Shengming, 2000). Describing relationships and roles within marriage is both difficult and complex. The relationship of married partners is rarely equal in terms of status, power, or responsibilities (Dryden, 1999). The inequities relate to the construction of the roles based on societal norms regarding gender. These norms set expectations that are typically held by individuals as well as by the society at large. Indeed, wives through the first half of the 20th century were often viewed as having no independent identities. For example, the norm was to

introduce the wife as Mrs. (husband's first and last name). These norms have been internalized by women themselves; the notion of limited agency and the importance of self-sacrifice were encouraged by both church and state organizations (Beers, 1992; Dressel, 1992).

Social relationships and gender roles underwent significant transformation in the mid-1960s. Family roles shifted and models emerged where middle-class and affluent women, even those who were mothers, worked and garnered resources and power (Moen, Erickson, & Dempster-McClain, 1997). During the years of transition, women increasingly found themselves with choices that contradicted well-established expectations (Violato, Oddone-Paolucci, & Genuis, 2000). For some women, these choices were never really an option, due to their cohort, cultural background, experiences, and socialization. For other women, the movement toward gender equity seemed to offer it all, and they enthusiastically embraced a sense of liberty. For yet others, the choices produced conflict and role strain. Perhaps, the women for whom the changing role expectations have been slowest are those who are most visible to the public, that is, women who are wives of men with public roles.

Wives of U.S. College and University Presidents

The wife of a college or university president is typically a woman who has resources and high social status primarily through her association with a powerful, high-achieving marital partner. Most college and university presidents are White men; their spouses are typically White women. According to Williams June's (2007) survey of U.S. presidents, as of 2006, 86% were White and 77% were male; in fact, "the remarkable thing about the profile of the typical college president—a married, graying White man with a doctoral degree—is how little it has changed over the last 20 years" (p. A33). Male presidents (90%) are also more likely than female presidents (57%) to be married (Magnuson, 2002; Ross & Green, 2000). Thus, the typical university or college president's spouse is female, and in our article we focus on her experiences.

Although it has been found that social class, as well as gender, requires differential analyses (Cline, Mejia, Coles, Klein, & Cline, 1984; Hawkins, Weisberg, & Ray, 1977), psychology has virtually ignored women who are viewed as privileged or powerful. Perhaps this is because, as sociologist David Reisman (as cited in Clodius & Magrath, 1984, p. 156) noted, "their positions appear to many nonintimate observers to be comfortable and even splendid." And yet many women have made personal and familial sacrifices in support of their husbands' careers. Their contributions are often behind the scenes and are little known or appreciated. They are expected to contribute in very major ways to their institutions and communities, often working long hours for little or no pay. They rely on public opinion to succeed in the work they do on behalf of their spouse and his institution, and yet their role

as advisor, counselor, and confidant to the executive is often minimized or ignored by the general public. Furthermore, many women arrive at this position relatively unprepared for public life.

In this article, we are less concerned with the resources available to university spouses and more concerned with their roles and perspectives. We focus on issues of identity, privacy, and the ability to build relationships—factors identified as important for an individual's sense of self (McCoubrey, 1998; Rukin, 1997). Additionally, we uncover the satisfactions, frustrations, and strategies of these women as they attempt to sustain a sense of self and personal well-being within the context of a relationship that must be enacted, often in large part, in public venues.

Privilege and Dual Expectations

Among the challenges for wives of important men is that of sustaining a sense of self while enacting the traditional female role in a society that increasingly expects women to create their own paths and make independent decisions. In a relationship where the husband has a prestigious and well-defined role, the female partner may still be expected to play a traditional role on a regular basis. This challenge is magnified in prominent women with social roles that are defined by tradition. For example, Hillary Rodham Clinton was a successful, prosperous attorney. When her husband was elected President of the United States, she was cast as First Lady, a role requiring her to enact a stereotypic wife role for public approval (Benokraitis, 1997; Rifkind, 2000). She gave a televised tour of the White House, served as hostess at State dinners, and even baked cookies to demonstrate her domestic ability. Similarly, Michelle Obama was previously a highly successful attorney, and now we typically hear about her parenting, fashion sense, or vacation choices (White House Website, 2009).

Presidential wives appear similar to spouses of elected officials, ministers, corporate leaders, military officers, and others who lead organizations, shape public perceptions, and influence social policies (Gill & Haurin, 1998; Todd, 1995). To understand the college presidential spouse is to understand the two-person career, where one spouse makes sacrifices, thus freeing the president to be completely devoted to his success in the workplace. Spouses of university presidents today are often called upon to serve in a variety of roles, and their lives are more complex than those who served in such positions in the past. Their private life may be the grist for public comment; their public role helps to create an image while simultaneously reflecting their spouse's success. As Frank Rhodes (1998, p. 12), president emeritus of Cornell University, suggested, university trustees and presidential search committees expect the campus "first lady" to be "a mixture of Queen Victoria, Florence Nightingale, and the best-dressed woman of the year."

What is often unspoken is that the high expectations, privilege, and prestige of the spousal position come not from their individual actions or accomplishments, but through their association with a powerful partner. Their husbands work in a public forum, often with considerable community attention; they administer institutions with numerous employees, including faculty and support staff; and they regularly interact with other persons of power, including legislators, corporate leaders, high-achieving individuals, and celebrities from many venues. The presidential team is a "living logo" for the institution, and the couple is often seen as a single entity (Thompson, 2010).

The Current Study

In the present study, we employed the voices of the women themselves to illuminate the issues and concerns that may affect their daily adjustment and well-being. By selecting university and college presidents' wives, we have a pool of individuals who have a number of characteristics in common: They are all married to men with a high level of recognition who are immersed in the public sphere and responsible for and to a variety of large constituencies. The adjustment and coping with changing personal and family social standing and visibility are challenges that most had or are trying to meet. We ask: How does the presidential wife establish her own identity in light of the pressure to be subsumed under her spouse's elevated position? How does she maintain personal privacy while living in a public space? How does she manage to sustain her personal well-being, as well as nurture familial and friend relationships?

Method

The study involved two parts: (a) an initial qualitative investigation, in which a series of focus group discussions and individual interviews were conducted and (b) a quantitative assessment, which consisted of an in-depth survey, was formulated based on the experiences, satisfactions, and frustrations identified by the women in the qualitative discussions. We concentrate on the population of women married to university and college presidents or chancellors at accredited 4-year colleges and universities in the United States. A number of male spouses were also interviewed and surveyed, but their responses are not included here.

Part 1: Eliciting Women's Perspectives

Part 1 consisted of a series of four focus groups and 10 interviews, which provided first-hand insight into the challenges encountered by "first women" and formed the basis for a more structured assessment. Initially, we approached spouses at professional university/college administrative conferences and invited them to participate in focus group discussions,

which were then conducted during the conferences. As presidential spouses ourselves, we were able to approach potential informants as “insiders,” and we believe that this approach facilitated participant confidence and encouraged their participation. Discussion groups consisted of 15–40 women and were conducted in private rooms. In addition, the 10 individual interviews were conducted either in person or via phone. In both the focus groups and interviews, a series of semistructured questions explored spouses’ reactions to the role of president or chancellor’s wife, her definition of the role, her satisfactions and dissatisfactions, and her strategies for maintaining a sense of privacy and for promoting individual well-being. (The full list of questions is available from the second author or in Appendix A with the electronic version of our article.) We took notes, but did not record responses. Some women later sent additional comments and responses, further elaborating their thoughts and offering appreciation for the opportunity to openly express and discuss their perspectives.

Part 2: Quantitative Examination of Experiences

Stemming from the issues raised in the discussions and interviews, we constructed a more detailed survey. (The full survey is available from the second author or in Appendix B with the electronic version of our article.) The survey included Likert-style and open-ended questions that addressed personal relationships, identity, expectations of self and others, life changes resulting from spouses’ career, and perceptions of well-being. Questions were rated on a 6-point scale, so that higher scores represent higher levels of the variable measured, unless otherwise indicated. (See Table 1 for a list of variables, scoring information, and descriptive statistics)

Mailing lists were obtained from three university/college organizations enrolling presidents and chancellors as members (the National Association of State Universities and Land-Grant Colleges, the Council of Independent Colleges, and the American Association of State Colleges and Universities), and spouses were invited to be a part of the study by completing the survey. The organizations provided mailing labels with names and addresses of presidents and their spouses. We again identified ourselves as “insiders” to encourage responsiveness by participants. Questionnaires were sent to 520 female presidential spouses; 214 women (41%) returned completed questionnaires. Most women completed all questions, though missing data reduced the sample size in some analyses, as noted in Table 1.

Participant Characteristics

Unfortunately, we did not collect in-depth information about the focus group and interview participants because we were more interested in gaining an initial understanding of women’s experiences rather than eliciting specific participant

information. Their comments and responses gave the women an opportunity to express their own perspectives and were used to inform the questionnaire. For the survey, women came from a wide variety of institutions, including small independent colleges, large metropolitan state and land-grant universities, religiously affiliated institutions, and historically African American colleges. The women ($N = 214$) were on average 54.6 years old ($SD = 7.17$). Most were Caucasian (94.6%), college graduates (92.7%), with many holding graduate degrees (65.7%), and claimed a Protestant affiliation (Protestant: 55.1%; Catholic: 16.8%; Other: 17.3%; None: 5.1%). About half of the women worked (51.6%). Most had one or more children (92.8%), though only some had children who lived at home (22.0%).

Results

Data Analyses

To explore the quantitative responses from the mailed survey, we conducted a cluster analysis using statistical analysis software (SAS; version 9.2). Cluster analysis is a multivariate data reduction technique that aims to uncover a structure to the data and offers an objective way to quantify how people are structurally related (Hair & Black, 2000). Groups of people are identified based on their responses to a set of items, and then other variables in the data set can be descriptively examined to describe the groups and understand differences. For clustering, we used eight variables that reflected level of involvement in the presidential spouse role: time spent in role, amount of privacy, importance of the presidential spouse role, importance of spousal role, the number of important outside roles, involvement in job changes, influence of spouse in the university and community, and own influence in the university and community. We first used a hierarchical method to identify a potential number of clusters or groups of individuals. This exploratory examination suggested that either three or six clusters best fit the data. We then used a K-means nonhierarchical approach, in which data are grouped into a predefined number of clusters. We tested three and six clusters. In the analysis, a centroid (the mean of multiple objects) is calculated for each cluster. Data are then moved to minimize the distance between the value and the mean of the other values, and a new centroid is calculated. The analysis essentially moves values around until each variable is closest to its respective centroid values and no more movement occurs between the clusters.

Types of Presidential Wives

Our cluster analysis indicated that six clusters best captured the data, explaining 83.7% of the variance among individuals. We then compared the groups on the demographic, institutional, personal characteristics, and feelings/experiences variables using the mean values by group, as summarized in Table 1. Each group is described below, using the comments

Table 1. Variable Descriptive Statistics by Cluster Group

Variable	Group 1: The Resigned		Group 2: The Supporters		Group 3: The Trapped		Group 4: The Ordinary		Group 5: The Adapters		Group 6: The Thrivers	
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD
	(n = 13)		(n = 34)		(n = 25)		(n = 78)		(n = 34)		(n = 30)	
Demographics												
Age	59.38	9.08	55.50	6.85	54.04	6.20	54.45	6.05	54.74	8.21	51.96	8.18
Employed ^a	0.14	0.38	0.44	0.51	0.73	0.46	0.57	0.50	0.40	0.50	0.55	0.51
Has children ^a	0.92	0.29	0.91	0.29	0.96	0.20	0.96	0.20	0.91	0.29	0.86	0.35
Children in home ^a	0.00	0.00	0.18	0.39	0.29	0.47	0.26	0.44	0.09	0.29	0.33	0.49
Education ^b	2.57	0.79	2.40	0.68	2.83	0.38	2.63	0.64	2.43	0.59	2.61	0.66
Institution characteristics												
Public school ^a	0.54	0.52	0.53	0.51	0.70	0.47	0.55	0.50	0.67	0.48	0.66	0.48
School size ^a	1.62	0.77	1.65	0.81	1.87	0.87	1.80	0.81	1.97	0.78	2.00	0.80
Urban ^b	2.00	0.91	2.21	0.91	2.24	0.83	2.06	0.91	1.90	0.75	1.96	0.79
Involvement in role as presidential spouse												
Time spent in role ^c	0.70	0.16	0.80	0.14	0.13	0.10	0.26	0.18	0.68	0.19	0.20	0.15
Amount of privacy ^d	4.15	1.99	3.79	1.69	3.13	1.54	3.79	1.52	3.47	1.52	4.03	1.30
Importance of role ^d	5.46	0.88	5.33	1.11	4.92	1.29	4.96	1.11	5.47	1.14	5.13	1.14
Participation in job changes ^d	0.09	0.09	0.48	0.05	0.13	0.11	0.45	0.07	0.98	0.05	0.98	0.05
Personal influence in community ^d	3.85	1.25	3.84	1.18	3.00	1.09	3.26	1.09	4.29	0.70	3.47	1.24
Spouse's influence in community ^d	5.58	0.49	5.60	0.42	5.42	0.76	5.60	0.49	5.77	0.33	5.45	0.81
Personal characteristics												
Internal locus of control ^d	4.72	0.47	4.84	0.72	4.48	0.98	4.74	0.80	4.96	0.54	4.87	0.80
Environmental mastery ^d	4.41	0.92	4.61	0.83	4.41	0.73	4.69	0.75	4.93	0.71	4.78	0.87
Purpose in life ^d	4.93	0.85	5.08	0.55	4.92	0.86	5.10	0.71	5.35	0.46	5.20	0.76
Importance of establishing own identity ^d	4.58	1.51	4.87	1.22	5.42	1.32	5.14	1.24	5.15	0.99	5.50	0.69
Feelings and experiences												
Success in establishing own identity ^d	4.90	1.10	4.86	0.89	4.83	1.40	5.05	1.07	5.09	0.93	5.22	1.01
Number of important roles in life	7.08	2.63	8.62	1.89	8.64	2.27	8.53	2.05	8.35	2.51	8.37	2.58
Overall satisfaction with life ^d	5.08	0.86	5.15	0.80	4.92	1.15	5.29	0.87	5.47	0.61	5.33	0.92
Feelings of contentment toward role ^d	4.37	0.78	4.38	0.76	3.93	1.22	4.33	1.11	4.55	0.94	4.47	0.80
Problems with privacy ^d	2.23	1.23	2.43	1.38	2.76	1.58	2.47	1.36	2.79	1.33	2.33	1.20
Comfort with personal influence ^d	5.58	0.95	4.84	1.15	5.27	1.25	5.36	0.89	5.36	0.97	5.07	1.35
Comfort with spouse's influence ^d	5.81	0.48	5.78	0.38	5.60	0.87	5.78	0.42	5.82	0.45	5.78	0.49
Meets own/others' expectations ^e	26.42	5.61	25.84	6.97	21.81	8.35	24.46	7.32	28.51	5.13	23.69	6.34
General health ^d	5.15	0.80	5.55	0.57	4.76	1.20	5.39	0.78	5.27	0.80	5.43	0.68

^a Dichotomous (0 = no, 1 = yes).

^b 1–3 scale.

^c Percentage out of 100.

^d 1–6 scale.

^e Perceived expectations weighted by satisfaction with those expectations.

from the free response questions in the surveys to highlight the findings, in order of lower to greater overall sense of well-being. Our main purpose is to explore the ways that these women enact and deal with issues of the traditional role of “wife,” expressed by the women themselves. We rely heavily on the women’s own voices to describe how they perceived their experience as wives of college and university presidents, because their words capture the emotions and experiences identified in the focus groups better than numbers alone can do.

Group 1: The resigned. The first group ($n = 13$) seemingly gave themselves completely to their role as a presidential spouse, resigned to where life had taken them. This small group was older, and its members were at smaller, private

schools in less urban settings. The presidential spouse role was important to them: They spent much of their time involved in the duties of the role and believed that they had significant influence on the community and university. Their own identity was less important, seemingly identifying with the presidential spouse role completely. However, their own well-being suffered. They reported lower overall life satisfaction and a lower sense of mastery and purpose in life, and they were somewhat less physically healthy.

This group had a more external locus of control and felt the least amount of involvement in their husband’s job changes. They were the least likely to be employed, with only 14% reporting outside employment. It was not always a conscious decision to stop working for pay. There are often a number of geographical relocations that future-presidential

couples make as he moves up the academic career ladder. Many spouses were not able to establish themselves and advance professionally in synchrony with their partner's moves. For example, one spouse had no position when she first moved to a new city, but she felt that it would not be a bad idea to take the year to get settled into her new situation. As the second year came, she was ready to return to work, but there was really no place to go. She commented, "I lost my business contacts. There is a real sense of loss, a real sense of loss."

Despite taking on the presidential spouse role, the inability to develop or sustain a career can be a source of regret. The demands on the presidential spouse's time to assist in academic entertaining and donor cultivation can be enormous. On average, women in this group spent 70% of their time each week fulfilling their role as a spouse of a president/chancellor. The majority felt torn. They regretted not having an independent career for which they were trained, and yet they saw it as their mission to serve their husbands' career. One woman noted, "I'm sorry I gave up my teaching career, but I couldn't see being a classroom teacher and giving my spouse the support he needed." Another lamented, "I very much regret not working fulltime in my profession and giving the leftover time to the school and community, rather than vice versa. The board would have accepted that if I had been strong enough to challenge my husband's expectations." A third woman noted, "I dislike having my time so consumed with the details of this position that it is difficult to find time for my own interests." Another woman wrote, "My professional identity has disappeared. I was a high school counselor for 14 years where we lived before. I no longer work, so that identity is gone."

Group 2: The supporters. The second group ($n = 34$) was similar to Group 1 in that they were older, less likely to be employed, and worked in smaller schools. Compared to the first group, they were less educated and lived in more urban locations. They were even more involved in the president spouse role than Group 1, spending an average of 80% of their time each week in the role. Their actions were more internally controlled, they had a higher sense of mastery and purpose in life, and other roles (such as family, friend, and neighbor) were also important to them. They felt that they had influence in the community and university but were uncomfortable with this level of influence.

Several wives appeared to have placed a premium on their ability to support their husbands' success through their efforts: "I enjoy seeing my husband thrive in his work and be able to make significant contributions through his leadership"; "The greatest satisfaction is knowing I supported him, and he is grateful. He often writes thank you notes to let me know"; and "I truly enjoy traveling and spending all my time with my husband, watching him as a leader." Some women wrote that they enjoyed their elevated status, but they did so somewhat guiltily, apparently recognizing that the benefits

were not from their own efforts, but rather from their marital position. One woman wrote, "I enjoy helping people. Okay, I confess, I like all the perks, too, such as a part-time housekeeper, nice home, etc."

Although friends and family were very important to the great majority of presidential spouses, they ironically were not as connected as they would like to be due to demands of the job. Women regretted not having more time to spend with children and grandchildren, who often lived far away. "This is our 4th year in this position. I struggle with the amount of time we give to the school and community that takes away from our children . . . I hope that in later years we, and they, won't regret our absence."

Group 3: The trapped. The third group ($n = 25$) was a younger group that was seemingly caught between two worlds, struggling to adapt to their role as presidential spouse while maintaining their own identity. They were the most likely to be employed, with 73% reporting outside employment. They were more likely to have children still living at home, and they were among the most educated women in our sample. They were at moderately sized, public schools in urban locations. Establishing their own identity was important, but they felt unsuccessful in doing so—feeling a lack of privacy, low mastery, low purpose in life, discontent with their role, and an overall dissatisfaction with life. They felt controlled by the job and environment, rather in control because of their own efforts and ability. They were also the least physically healthy group.

Conflict can arise for women pursuing their own careers. The lack of time and control of her family's schedule can be a major issue. The spouse with her own profession lives in the president's home, and she may be expected to attend countless dinners and other campus and community events—in spite of the demands of her own job. One spouse felt that she *had* to give up her job because the demands of dinners four nights a week would not leave time or energy to plan for a working day. As she thought about her decision, she added, "Presidents expect their wives to be there to support them in crises and with problems, but when we need support, sometimes they are not there for you."

Among the difficulties that these women raised was the fact that having an influential public spouse interfered with many aspects of personal life, including the development of personal relationships. Wives wished that their husbands had more free time to spend with them instead of being so thoroughly booked with university-related functions. One woman noted, "The most frustrating thing for me is my husband not being available sometimes, especially on weekends when I would like him to be with me. The only way I can be with him is to participate in university functions." Another woman wrote, "Though I love teaching, it frequently conflicts with my husband's wishes to travel, lunch with donors, etc. It remains a source of conflict—though he knows my teaching is important to my self-image."

Women also found it difficult to make true friends. One woman noted, "It's hard to make friends in a smaller town, especially with people who have a 'president complex'." Another wrote, "There is no one to really bare my soul to. Every word and gesture is open to the hearer's interpretation. This makes for a lonely life at times. I thank God for my husband, my best friend of 37 years, but sometimes you just need a good girlfriend to talk things over with!" On the campus itself, everyone works for the president, and there are many factors that militate against a friendship with employees. For example, a spouse may know confidential information about a friend's employment situation. One woman gave this example: Her husband was about to fire a controversial academic dean, who was married to "a dear friend." Another spouse knew that her husband was job hunting but had not yet informed his board, and her best friend was the daughter of a major donor. In both cases, disclosing to a friend, the way that other women might, would bring disastrous results to her spouse.

The other side of the coin is that virtually all presidential spouses have experienced a friend or acquaintance telling them something with the expectation or hope that she would pass it on to her husband. One woman commented, "My most difficult problem is that we came to a university where my best friend works. It's sometimes difficult when she brings business up at a casual gathering and tries to take advantage of the opportunity." These situations and others like them make friendships difficult and sometimes impossible.

In addition, the social demands that some spouses face may be a totally new or uncomfortable experience. Several of our respondents talked about having no background in entertaining, yet finding themselves thrust into the role of hostess to dignitaries and important donors. Others wrote about being shy or otherwise uncomfortable socially. One woman expressed her concern in this way: "I am by nature an introvert. I find it extremely difficult to make small talk in large groups of people. It is torture for me, but I try not to disappoint my husband."

A major issue for this group was demands on their time and energy combined with a lack of privacy. Several women described vivid incidents in which they felt that their privacy (or the privacy of their family) was invaded. One woman noted, "I will never get used to people's casual yet personal comments about us, our home, and our life. The privacy issue is the hardest. Everyone seems to be in your business and everyone has an opinion about decisions you make for yourself." Another explained, "You need some time just to hide out. There are times when we have no privacy. It's the hardest thing to live in a house with people in it all the time." A third woman commented, "It's hard getting used to having most people in town know everything you are doing—or at least it seems that way."

Many women found that living in the public eye imposed on the time they had to spend with their husbands. One noted, "The lack of privacy has put a strain on our marriage. I've

found that the pressure on my spouse's time and energy can leave me feeling as if I no longer count." Others felt that the constant observation of their activities made it difficult to have a private life. For example, women commented, "I dislike not having enough privacy. It is a constant struggle finding time for each other" and "We rarely go out for dinner together or are with a small group, casually, when a member of the public doesn't approach us (mostly my husband, of course) to say hello or ask questions. Do I like it when we're out-of-town and no one knows us? YES!! The anonymity is wonderful!!!"

Some women felt that the spouse role impinged on their personal space and time, made demands on them, or constrained their ability to define their own roles. "I dislike the fact that I have to fight for privacy. The university feels entitled to own my time without paying for it. I think that's a disgrace." Others were more accepting about being in the public eye, even if it would not be their first choice: "I really don't ask to be put on a pedestal and looked at all the time, but it seems to come with the territory." Accompanying the imposition for some women was the feeling that they had to closely monitor their behavior. For example, different women noted, "Don't do anything you don't want to read about in the newspaper"; "I have learned to edit my words and behavior at the appropriate times (although I get myself into trouble once in a while because I am a verbal person . . . my husband sometimes tells me I have to tone things down a bit)"; and "People in our community love to create and perpetuate rumors. If one of our events is not perfect, people can be really nasty."

There were also concerns noted about living in university housing. Wives who lived in a campus "president's home" reported that people are in and out of the house constantly. They find it difficult to live in a house that is open to others, that has to look good always, and that cannot be decorated or remodeled without the consultation or approval of others. One woman stated, "I would like to remodel our bedroom closet, but I can't justify to myself or to the board spending university funds for something so trivial. If I owned the home, I wouldn't hesitate to make the change." Another noted, "Sometimes I long for my own home—one I can totally decorate to my own tastes." In one interview, a woman described how the unannounced appearance of university workers in the house so traumatized her teenage son that he moved back into the family home in town and never slept in the presidential house again.

Group 4: The ordinary. The fourth group was the largest group ($n = 78$) and was closest to the mean across most of the variables. This suggests that the typical presidential spouse has both challenges and satisfactions, perhaps in equal measure.

Group 5: The adapters. The fifth group ($n = 34$) was similar to Group 1, in that they had fully adopted the presidential spouse role. Whereas Group 1 felt controlled by external

events, this group fully took hold of their role, seeing it as their own choice and a source of personal fulfillment. These women demonstrated the most positive combination of internal characteristics and found satisfaction in their role as a presidential wife. They were less likely to be employed and attained a lower level of education. They were at larger public schools in more rural areas. They had a strong internal locus of control, a high sense of mastery and purpose in life, and felt that they successfully met their own and others' expectations. They reported the most problems with privacy, but were most content with the role and satisfied with their lives.

Many wives felt fulfilled by the recognition that they were actively contributing to the university's success through their efforts in the spouse role. They viewed the presidential spousal role as important and spent significant time in the role: an average of 68% of their time per week. They were very involved in any job changes and felt that both they and their husbands had considerable influence in the university and community. Different women reflected, "I enjoy building community through social gatherings"; "I really believe in this university and like promoting it"; and "I have felt great satisfaction about my contribution to fundraising and overall image of the university."

A number of women garnered satisfaction that their traditional skills were appreciated and recognized. For example, one woman wrote: "This may sound horribly shallow, but it's the truth. I am very proud when visitors compliment the home's decor, or a dessert, or the Christmas decorations or the flowers around the house, or tell me this house has never looked so elegant or beautiful or lovely." Others appreciated their interactions with the students: "I believe I enjoy the students the most—their honesty, challenging nature, and genuine openness. I enjoy the opportunity to interact with them. I believe they see me as a positive role model, a friend, and most of all a supporter/cheerleader for them, as students and as individuals."

Perhaps the most cited satisfaction was the social pleasures garnered from being in the position to meet people who they might not have met as a "regular" citizen. As one woman wrote, "I enjoy the variety of interesting and accomplished people with whom the job brings us into contact, including donors, artists, authors, etc. That's been an unexpected bonus."

Group 6: The thrivers. The sixth group ($n = 30$) was similar to Group 3, whereas Group 3 seemingly struggled to adjust, Group 6 demonstrated a pattern of good adjustment. They were the youngest group; some were employed, some not; and they were more likely to have children living at home, if they had children at all. They were at larger, public schools in more rural settings. They spent less time in the role and felt that they and their spouse had less influence in the university and community. Establishing their own identity was very important, and they felt successful doing so. They were very involved in any job changes; had a high internal locus of

control, a high sense of mastery, and strong purpose in life; and were relatively satisfied with both their role and their overall lives. They recognized the status and power that accompanies their position, and they enjoyed the benefits that accrue to them because of it. For example, two women noted, "I like being in the center or heartbeat of what's going on" and "It's nice having the attention, being important and respected. For the first time people listen to what I have to say. My opinion counts."

Common Themes

The six groups identified suggest that wives of college and university presidents are a heterogeneous group. Some have been in the public eye for years; others are relatively new. Some are completely devoted to the traditional role, some are relatively detached, and others are caught in the middle. Some have had positive experiences and find the role satisfying; others experience frustration, stress, and regret. However, there were several themes that were prevalent in both the discussion and survey responses centering on personal and professional identities, issues of privacy, relationships with others, and satisfying aspects of being a president's wife.

Identity. In personal interviews and focus groups, virtually all spouses made poignant and heartfelt comments on the issue of identity. Spouses identified as problematic both the loss of identity as a professional and as a person in her own right. Although over half of the women were employed, their careers frequently suffered. Identity conflicts at the professional level appeared most poignant. Although only a minority of the women described the experience of loss, those who did so spoke with obvious emotion about the circumstances that led to the sacrifice of a particular job or an entire career. Even after they presented their assurances that they had adjusted and resigned themselves, the emotionality of their sense of loss was palpable for some, even many years later. One woman wrote, "I wish I had paid more time and attention to my own needs/desires/ambitions," and another noted, "My biggest regret is that I did not maintain a more separate identity/professional career of my own. I am glad I worked with my husband initially; now I need my own thing."

Most women in our study held their role as president's wife as one of the most important parts of their lives. They spoke positively of getting to know students, making contributions to the university and the outside community, and opportunities to travel. However, at times, conflict and frustration punctured these experiences. Some resented the countless hours they put in without recognition. In an otherwise unemotional response to our survey one woman wrote, "not getting paid for everything I do really pisses me off." Another woman wrote, "I know it is irrational, but I blame my (catastrophic illness) on this awful job and the stress it caused me." Others expressed concern about being perceived as a person of little consequence. As one wife described her

role with respect to the college's board of trustees, "I just show up and stand around."

A number of respondents struggled daily with challenges related directly to their spousal role, but most did so with a spirit that combined both an effort to maintain a positive outlook and resignation that this is the route to follow in support of their husband. Of the women who were openly critical, most directed their displeasure at the nature of the position that demands so much of their lives and requires great sacrifices of family time and personal choice. Several of them expressed doubt about their ability to sustain a sense of themselves as individuals in the face of competing demands from the institution, the community, and their husbands. Yet, many others appeared confident as they work toward a sense of self. As one woman explained, "it is not driving me nuts, I take one day at a time or one year at a time . . . whatever feels right to me."

Some wives felt diminished, seeing themselves as living in their husbands' shadows, rather than being recognized for their own attributes. Whereas presidential wives may be invited to join prestigious nonprofit boards and social groups, they often experience these offers as reflected prestige due to their husbands' rather than their own accomplishments. There were also the experiences of being overlooked or feeling diminished as "just the wife" among others who "belong" more closely to the university community (e.g., faculty, alumni, administrators, or supporters). One spouse sent us a copy of an invitation to a dinner at her home in which her name was omitted. She attached a note to us saying, "The only thing that kept me sane when I saw this invitation was the knowledge I could show it to you as one illustration of how the spouse is often made invisible." In one focus group, a woman pointed to the middle name on her nametag saying, "See that name? It's all that's left of me." Another woman wrote, "My husband is always introduced as 'Dr X' and I as his wife, 'Mrs. X.' First, my name is hyphenated; and second, I am also a Dr. It is a small thing and probably shouldn't bother me, except it happens everyday."

Professional men, in general, tend to have higher salaries than their wives. Thus, if a dual career couple uses economics to decide whether to move for her career or his, his job will typically take precedence as the higher contribution. One of the survey respondents had a PhD in arts and had been a costume designer. She wrote with both tongue-in-cheek and movingly mixed feelings that although she no longer used the particular skills for which she was trained, she had come to enjoy her role as a hostess: "I get to plan lots of parties and create lots of large and fun centerpieces for that table for 18 with the 18 matching chairs. Now I can create costumes for the table. I like to tell people that when I saw that large dining table I knew there was a role for me here—most likely a dinner roll (and add to myself I hope it doesn't get stale)."

Privacy. Many women noted a lack of privacy as an issue, frequently using the term "living in a fishbowl." Some saw

it as a minor stress or inconvenience. For others, however, the lack of privacy was a major concern, causing continual stress. Many were able to take the situation in stride, making adjustments to having workers come in and out of their home, to having their husbands accosted if they venture out to dinner together, and to becoming a topic of public conversation. Although survey respondents did not report lack of privacy as a major problem in their lives, interviewees and focus group participants were eager to articulate their experiences and feelings about this condition of their position.

Relationships. Another conflict that was particularly problematic for these spouses on a personal level was the difficulty in sustaining the network of friendships on which many women could rely, especially as they moved into their senior years. These women often followed their spouses to new cities, leaving family behind. Even relationships with old friends may change; a presidential spouse possesses a new level of prestige and power that may make it difficult to sustain close relationships. The close connection to the president also posed challenges to women who wished to maintain family relationships as well as friendships outside of the family. Lives of spouses, for example, were frequently taken up with visits to other families, especially those of trustees and major donors, leaving little time for their own families, particularly if they lived at a distance. Friends were difficult to make and keep. In some cases, the spouse had an overwhelming amount of confidential information to protect, or everyone she comes into contact with works for her husband. It often became necessary to relate to old friends in new ways to protect herself and her spouse from breaches in confidence or other types of exploitation. As one woman noted, "I don't have a circle of friends. I really don't. . . . I cannot tell anyone things; I don't ever want to give someone an inside track on my husband."

Discussion

This inquiry examined the rewards and challenges of wives of university and college presidents. Although we live in an historical era in which the role of "wife" has changed dramatically, these wives are still often expected to play a traditional role. Whereas the status of women in public and private spheres continues to be transformed, and the level of change for any individual may vary with family, community, and other social influences, university and college communities provide a microcosm of many other parts of our society: they may be urban, suburban, or rural; they comprise a sizable population or may be very small; and their economic resources and conditions may also vary. Thus, the wives of presidents and chancellors have issues similar to those of spouses of other public leaders.

Despite challenges, complaints, and issues, most presidential wives reported very high satisfaction with their marriages, their lives, and their roles as presidential spouses. Most tried to see the benefits in their experiences of privilege

and prestige. Social opportunities that present themselves, either for doing good or for interacting with interesting people, seemed particularly satisfying. The majority of spouses said that the satisfactions balance, outweigh, or far outweigh the challenges. There were, however, a small percentage of spouses who seemed extremely bitter.

We must insert a methodological note about a difference that we noticed between the interview and survey responses. In our face-to-face interviews and focus group discussions, we collected proportionately more complaints and examples of identity loss than we received via the survey. The interviews were conducted at conferences specifically for presidential spouses, where we were more likely to encounter women who were not engaged in separate professional roles. Indeed, most women attending the spouses' part of the organizational meeting had made the decision to invest themselves heavily in the spouse role. The survey data, on the other hand, were a more representative sample of wives across the country. At the same time, the questionnaire answers may be more susceptible to reporting biases, due to the public nature of presidents' lives and the responsibility that wives often undertake to present a united and noncritical image of their family life. Despite assurances of confidentiality, some women may have been concerned about the confidentiality of their written statements. In personal interviews, some women asked repeatedly and nervously about confidentiality, but they still seemed eager to express their views on the topics. In fact, in one interview, an unsuspecting husband walked up to the interviewee and she nervously blurted out to him, "I've been telling all of our secrets." Thus, we believe that the surveys may contain somewhat more socially acceptable responses.

We focus here on issues that appear ubiquitous for wives across the socioeconomic spectrum, but may pose unique challenges for women with high status and high resources, particularly those who accrue their status through marriage to a prominent man. We believe that issues such as identity, privacy, and maintaining close relationships are salient for a wide variety of public wives. Indeed, to some extent they may be relevant for *all* wives. However, the experience of privilege and prestige has been insufficiently considered by researchers and may not be taken by psychotherapists with the seriousness that it warrants. Women who may appear to "have it all" experience ups and downs and are not immune to life's challenges. As feminist psychologists we tend to know much more, understandably so, about oppressed and victimized women than we do about privileged ones. And yet our responsibility is to a broader, truly inclusive, band. By framing the issues in terms of the intersection of gender and social class, we may begin to view marriage in different ways and to understand how essentialist representations of wives can distort our understanding of women's lives.

Authors' Note

The research presented in this article formed the basis of Ellen Cole's Society for the Psychology of Women Presidential Address

at the American Psychological Association (APA) convention in August 2010 in San Diego, CA.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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