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Family Myths That

These 10 beliefs are widely held—and widely destructive

THE OTHER DAY, one of my graduate students blurted out: "I guess I shouldn't be surprised that my marriage isn't going smoothly. Most married couples are unhappy, aren't they?"

That's a myth, I said—and a dangerous one. Actually, the vast majority of U.S. marriages are successful. The University of Michigan Survey Research Center recently interviewed nearly 2,500 married persons representing a cross section of the nation's population. One out of three asserted he (or she) was "very happy," more than half said they were "pretty happy," and only one in 10 admitted being "not too happy."

Another dangerous myth involves the statistic, "one out of four U.S. marriages ends in divorce." True, there are 400,000 divorces a year and 1,500,000 marriages. But the divorce figure must be considered in relation to the total number of married couples—40 million—not the number married in one year. Thus probably no more than one out of 10 or 15 marriages eventually ends in divorce.

Unfortunately, belief in the widespread prevalence of divorce and "unhappy" marriages has led to a fatalistic approach to married life. Too many people believe that matrimony is a gamble and that they have to be lucky to stay wed. So, instead of committing themselves wholeheartedly to building a good marriage, they feel hopeless when conflicts occur.

As an anthropologist, I detect a number of widely held concepts about family life that are so outmoded or spurious that they should be classed as myths. Here are some of the most prevalent ones:

1. A husband loses his masculine image when he does a housewife's chores.

Some months ago, I asked an audience of 300 Air Force reservists: "When you were a small boy, how many of you were put to bed by your father? No more than five hands went up. Then I asked those who were married and had children:



Contrary to myth, Dad isn't less masculine when he helps with kitchen chores.

"How many of you put your son or daughter to bed?" All but two raised their hands.

The point I wanted to make was that our culture is dynamic and that we are moving toward more and more partnership in the home. Concepts of the manly man and the womanly woman are no longer what they used to be. Today, sharing in household chores is an accepted part of being a husband.

2. A working mother is bound to neglect her family.

Of the 22 million women in the nation's work force, three out of five are married; and two of every five

mothers who work have children at the school-age level.

I firmly believe that a woman can be a good wife and mother while holding down an outside job. Such a woman tends to compensate for the time she is away by being more attentive when she is home. It's the quality of the time spent with the family, not the quantity, that is more important.

3. Being "just a housewife" deprives a woman of self-fulfillment in life.

The American woman who is a full-time homemaker has been subtly devalued over the years. A myth has

Make Trouble

By ETHEL J. ALPENFELS
Professor of Anthropology, New York University

with Theodore Irwin

grown up that being "just a housewife" is unsatisfying because it does not permit a woman to utilize all her potential assets. Today's homemaker, however, does perform a vital creative role. The term, "profession: homemaker," is receiving more and more respect as women realize the satisfactions of maintaining an attractive, comfortable "nest" for their families.

4. Separation or divorce is always a cruel blow to children.

If children are aware of bitter conflicts between their parents and if their home is barren of love, separation or divorce is likely to come as a relief to them. For a child, an empty marriage can be more cruel than a broken home.

On the other hand, divorce *does* come as a painful shock to children who have been kept in the dark concerning their parents' troubles.

Shielding a child from such family problems relegates him to a world of his own. It may keep him psychologically secure for a time; but in the long run, it delays his maturing process and only makes it harder for him to adjust to the cold realities of life.

5. When a family moves, the experience is particularly difficult for the children.

One out of five Americans moves each year, and the average family moves a total of eight times during the years they are together. But most children don't mind. Every survey indicates youngsters find moving an exciting adventure—for a changing world is the only one they know. It is adults who are apprehensive about putting down new roots, and sometimes this sense of insecurity rubs off on their children.

6. Boys should be taught that it's unmanly to cry.

Unthinking mothers still tell small boys: "Mother won't love you if you cry." This is a harmful attitude. Like any other human being, a boy must have an outlet for his feelings. Training him to cork up emotions (frustration, anger, hate) that are disapproved may cause him to grow up into a warped, hostile adult. Even though venting an emotion through tears is considered a "female" trait, the truly masculine man in our society combines certain sensitive feminine qualities with his masculinity.

A similar convention dictates that it isn't manly for a little boy to play with dolls. But boys grow up to be fathers—and they, like girls, must be taught to love babies. When parents ridicule a small boy who occasionally wants to play with his sister's dolls, it may leave a lasting subconscious mark which later may keep him from becoming a devoted father.

7. Togetherness is essential for good family life.

A married couple should share their joys and woes. But togetherness can be overdone. A woman is apt to be a more exciting person if she participates in some activities not directly related to her family. And the same principle holds true for husbands.

8. Marital relations are more important to a husband than to his wife.

That is a notion left over from the Victorian era. The truth is that, with certain exceptions, the average wife is just as interested in marital relations as her husband is.

9. Mothers-in-law are a menace to a happy marriage.

Some mothers do interfere in their children's marriages, but by and large the extent of the intrusion is exaggerated. Unfortunately, the barrage of mother-in-law jokes intimidates some women so much that they abdicate their responsibilities as grandparents. Gifts sent to grandchildren from a retirement town 1,000 miles away are not enough. The greatest gift that a grandmother can offer is her own presence.

10. Jealousy among brothers and sisters is normal.

Extreme sibling rivalry is an American product fostered by parents. As a result of our overcompetitive drives, this disruptive influence is now at its height.

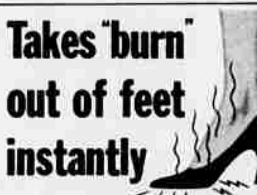
In many other countries, there is little rivalry among children in a family. For instance, a boy in India is expected to guide his sister, not compete with her. Just the opposite is too often true in this country, and it can endanger family life.

The same is true of believing in the other marriage myths I have discussed. When stereotyped thinking lingers and parents neglect to keep pace with modern trends, needless family tensions result.

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