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A new book called "American Couples" is a gold mine of research to support very traditional attitudes about sex, marriage and family. The book was certainly not written from a moralistic, traditional or conservative perspective; that is obvious from the fact that it gives equal space and non-judgmental respect to four different types of couples -- traditional marriage, cohabitation without marriage, lesbians, and male homosexuals.

Advertised as "the most comprehensive study of American couples ever undertaken," its conclusions are based on massive research gleaned from thousands of questionnaires and hundreds of interviews into all types of couples. The authors are Drs. Philip Blumstein and Pepper Schwartz, who had generous support from the National Science Foundation. Here are a few of its surprising conclusions.

Despite the popularity of the Me or Self attitudes, people still passionately want to live in couples. Despite the oft-repeated slogan that "the American family has changed," the happiest kinds of couples are those with traditional attitudes and practices.

The authors of "Couples" discovered that, in successful marriages, the wife motivates the husband to be ambitious and achieving. Marriages have less chance of surviving when the wife is the ambitious one because the husband does not seem to want to live with a woman who is ambitious for her own career. The research shows that the more ambitious the wife is for her own career, the more likely it is that the husband will want to end the relationship.

We have been told that child-rearing and housework will be shared in the modern world, and that women's liberation will force husbands to do their equal share of the housework. Some feminists have even proposed marriage contracts committing husbands to specific domestic duties.

The research of "Couples" shows that housework has become a source of conflict. The marriage is less likely to survive if the husband feels his wife does not do her fair share of the household tasks and, according to husbands, the wife's "fair" share is a whole

lot more than half. Husbands are not particularly opposed to their wives taking a job in the paid work force, just so long as they continue to run the household.

It is commonly believed that women today (in contrast with yesteryears) see themselves as part of the labor force for a large part of their lives. "Couples" concludes that this is true, but women's self-image does not include taking on the provider role. In other words, even when wives want to hold paid jobs, they still want the husband to be the provider.

Despite inflation and peer pressure pushing wives out of the home, 52% of mothers with pre-school children are at home. Even more interesting, the majority of men and women prefer that mothers with pre-school children not be in the paid work force.

We've been told that the modern young woman can have marriage and success at the same time. "Couples" shows that the more a wife achieves in her job, the greater her chance of divorce and the smaller her chance of remarriage.

For example, women between the ages of 35 and 44 with graduate degrees and personal incomes about $20,000 have four times the divorce rate of women with lower achievement and a 20% chance of never remarrying. The figures for men are about the reverse.

The old double standard about sex and age remains as strong as ever. If a woman is divorced in her twenties, she has a 76% chance of remarriage, in her thirties her chances drop to 56%, in her forties they plunge to 32%, in her fifties she has less than a 12% chance of remarriage.

It's entirely different with a man; he can always look for a younger spouse. Men in their second marriage tend to marry women five or more years younger, and men in their forties marry women ten years younger.

"Couples" concludes that the divorce rate for second marriages is even higher than for first marriages. That's contrary to a current notion that, since people learn a lot in their first marriage, marriages are safer "the second time around."

Contrary to what we may have been told by those who think that marriage is just a formality and a piece of paper, it isn't that way in real life. Less than two percent of couples cohabiting without marriage live together for as long as ten years, and cohabitation tends to be primarily a childless lifestyle.