

# Betty Crocker Versus Betty Friedan: Meanings of Wifehood Within a Postfeminist Era

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## Abstract

In this article, deploying Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* and the fictional American icon Betty Crocker within a poststructural feminist analysis, the author analyzes a social science data set investigating how 18 contemporary wives think about wifehood. Crocker and Friedan are emblematic of the cultural DNA that make up wifehood: The mythical Betty Crocker represents the happy, traditional housewife of the 1950s, and Betty Friedan offers a critique of the happy, traditional housewife figure. Thinking about historical trends, in the 1950s to 1960s, femininity and families were rigidly prescribed and, thus, largely unquestioned. In the 21st century, with the influx of postfeminism, prescriptions for femininity and families are thought to be less rigid—but are they? Contemporary wives' identity negotiations mapped onto both Betty Crocker and Betty Friedan but remained anchored in the Betty Crocker image.

## Keywords

marriage, wives, femininity, identities, contemporary women, history

1. I think a wife should be someone who is supporting him [her husband] and loving and . . . I try really hard not to nag . . . I just want to

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- be there for him and, and just to make him happy because he makes me really happy.
2. I live through my husband and children. It's easier that way. In this world now, it's easier to be a woman, if you take advantage of it.
  3. I believe homemaking is a noble and challenging career.
  4. And the girls [say], "Oh, you're married. It's so exciting," and I [responded], "You better stop that now. It is hard work, like day to day it is work. It is not something that is just peaches and cream every single day after you put that white dress on."
  5. I don't like housework at all. I'm a lousy house worker. But once in a while I get pepped up and I'll really go to town . . . When I have some new kind of cleaning material . . . —I got a real kick out of it, and I went through the house shining everything. I like to see the things shine. I feel so good when I see the bathroom just glistening.
  6. I was raised to be a wife. I just basically was raised to do this for a man. If he asks for a drink, you better know what it is and you better get it. And if he is trying to throw something away, and people are in the way, you better get up and do it for him. And you better know what he wants on his plate, when he wants it, how much of it he wants, and you should get everything for him specifically, and if he needs something, you better know before he has to ask. So, I was just raised to think . . . "Oh, a wife does everything, and a man works and comes home, and the wife continues to do everything."

The above excerpts were taken from three distinct sources (a) 1950s housewives interviewed by Betty Friedan (1963) and subsequently published in *The Feminine Mystique*, (b) quotations attributed to the fictional Betty Crocker (the American icon who embodies the image of the traditional 1950s happy housewife), and (c) new wives living in Texas, United States, who were part of a social science study conducted between 2006 and 2008. The reader is asked to consider whether she or he can distinguish which quotes were said by housewives in the 1950s, which were said by new wives in the 21st century, and which ones were attributed to Betty Crocker.

If the reader is like hundreds of others who have done this exercise during the author's presentations (e.g., Sharp, 2013; Sharp, Allen, Weaver & Jaramillo-Sierra, 2015), she or he will struggle to match excerpts with the correct source.<sup>1</sup> This struggle raises critical questions about current conceptualizations of wifehood: Why is it difficult to discern between remarks from 1950s wives and contemporary wives? What does this reveal about ideological frames and cultural practices of contemporary wifehood?

I suggest that the overlap in the sentiment expressed in these excerpts reflects broad notions of femininity, domesticity, and wifehood that have remained intact for 50+ years. These notions continue to inform cultural understandings and practices of contemporary wifehood. While the ideas and images of 1950s housewife images are still circulating, feminist challenges to traditional wifehood are also firmly embedded within the cultural landscape. In this article, I argue that alongside the resurgence of traditional wifehood (i.e., Betty Crocker) there is a notable challenge to this traditional/Betty Crocker image of domesticity and that the coexistence of both is linked post-feminism (Gill, 2007). Contemporary young women are faced with opposing cultural images of a “good wife”—either traditional 1950s (i.e., Betty Crocker) or feminist (i.e., Betty Friedan’s critique of the feminine mystique), although the feminist image is much more diffuse than the 1950s wife image.

The purpose of the present article is to explore the meanings of contemporary wifehood as expressed by new wives living in conservative towns in the contemporary United States. The central analysis brings to bear on these new wives’ experiences the representations of the mythical Betty Crocker and major ideas from Betty Friedan’s *The Feminine Mystique*. Using poststructural feminism (Scott, 1988), I foreground a Crocker–Friedan binary of wifehood, contrasting Betty Crocker (the iconic, idealized, happy homemaker) with Betty Friedan (the iconic feminist who raised critical questions about false feminine fulfillment in the role of housewife), as an analytical device to consider contemporary wifehood and its relation to the past. As a binary, Betty Crocker and Betty Friedan represent significant poles of the ideal of wifehood within contemporary America (see Table 1 for a brief historical overview and description of each). As I theorize below, the Crocker–Friedan binary is symbolic of a larger dilemma faced by young women in the current postfeminist era, whereby young women have been exposed to and hold both antifeminist and feminist ideas simultaneously (Gill, 2007).

### *Wifehood, Domesticity, and Young Women’s Identities*

Although there has been considerable recent research investigating household labor and specific activities of wives (see England, 2010), comparatively little research has closely examined how wives themselves conceptualize wifehood within late modernity. Decades ago, feminist social scientists investigated wifehood/housewifery and raised critical questions about the ideology of wives, the institution of marriage (Bernard, 1972/1982; Oakley, 1974), and the institution of heterosexuality (Rich, 1980). Since that time, radical critiques of wifehood and heterosexual marriage within feminist social science have dissipated (see Brook, 2002). Explicitly naming this trend, feminist psychologist

**Table 1.** Betty Crocker Versus Betty Friedan: Selected Facts.

## Betty Crocker: The feminine directive/public identity/happiness

- Crocker is a fictionalized woman used as a brand to sell products.
- Crocker's image as a happy homemaker was meant to create an ideal (the name Betty as chosen because it was sounded "friendly").
- Since the 1920s, Betty Crocker, in effect, served to promote and keep the "happy housewife" image popular.
- Betty Crocker helped remind women that their primary identity was in the home.
- The portrait of Betty Crocker is updated every decade to reflect shifting cultural ideologies.
- In the 1980s, Betty Crocker was depicted as a "CEO/Wife/Mother" and, in the 2000s, Betty Crocker website exploited the trend for increasing number of mothers staying at home.<sup>a</sup>
- The 75th anniversary portrait gave Betty "a more ethnic look than before . . . images of 75 women who were felt to most embody the spirit of Betty were merged to create the innovative portrait."
- Betty Crocker's mark on the collective public psyche is made evident in the fact that "she" was voted the second most recognizable female in the United States (second to Eleanor Roosevelt) in 1945.<sup>b</sup>

## Betty Friedan: The feminine mystique/personal identity/discontent

- Betty Friedan was an actual woman who lived within the conditions she wrote about.
- Friedan worked to expand women's sense of self, pursuing a critique of larger societal ideologies oppressing White, middle-class women.
- Friedan has been lauded as a forceful catalyst for the revival of feminist thought and feminist agenda into the larger, collective psyche in the United States.
- Friedan helped make visible a critical analysis of the restricted identities of women in the late 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s.
- Friedan exposed the "problem with no name" by giving it a name—*The Feminine Mystique*. She argued that privileged constructions of (White, middle class) femininity were tightly linked with wifehood and motherhood and that these narrow ideas about femininity lead to women feeling discontent and isolated.
- Friedan sought to expose the fictional happy housewife figure by revealing the pervasive sense of unhappiness and disillusionment felt by actual housewives.
- The year 2013 marked 50 years since Betty Friedan's landmark book, *The Feminine Mystique*, was published.

<sup>a</sup>See website for the *Story of Betty Crocker*: <http://www.bettycrocker.co.uk/TheBettyStory#sthash.wclBEzBX.dpuf>. <sup>b</sup>People are still surprised to learn that Betty Crocker is an imaginary figure, created to respond to requests for recipe advice and later used as propaganda. As stated on Betty Crocker's official website, ". . . Following a response to a Gold Medal Flour promotion, Betty Crocker was created to give a personal response to an overwhelming number of letters from women requesting cooking advice." The Betty Crocker image was later used as propaganda to reassure women that engaging in full-time housework and child care was a "noble profession." Indeed, as Marjorie Husted (one of the home economists who helped create Betty Crocker) explained, "Woman needed a champion. Here were millions of them staying at home alone doing a job with children, cleaning, cooking on minimal budget, the whole depressing mess of it. They needed someone to remind them they had value."

Tolman (2012) argued that there has been “minimal critical questioning of institutionalized heterosexuality *within* (and outside) the academy” (p. 753). The dearth of questioning may be linked to demographers and historians claiming that marriage (and, thus, wifehood) is now deinstitutionalized (Cherlin, 2004) and individualized (Coontz, 2005), suggesting that gendered patterns in marriage are (more or less) a relic of the past.

During the time Betty Friedan was writing *The Feminine Mystique*, sociologist Jessie Bernard was researching and writing about marriage and career pathways among women in the United States and her findings were consistent with Friedan’s analysis (Bernard, 1963). Jessie Bernard would later write her famous book, *The Future of Marriage* (1972/1982), revealing “his and her marriage,” showcased the structural constraints of marriage and the unequal, divergent understandings and experiences of wives and husbands in the same marriage. “His” marriage reaped more benefits. Over 40 years later, these dominant patterns remain in force (e.g., Elliott & Umberson, 2008)—in part, because tasks that had been traditionally assigned to housewives are so devalued that men (on average) continue to avoid or distance themselves from doing such demeaning work (England, 2010). This points to wider structural constraints that have remained intact for decades (e.g., Jaramillo-Sierra & Allen, 2013).

Benefits for husbands, were due, in large part, to persistent ideologies described in *The Feminine Mystique*, which, although tempered within recent contexts, continue to link wifehood with domesticity, pressing on women to be responsible for the house and, thus, to accept and engage in a disproportionate share of household labor (Yavorsky, Dush, & Schoppe-Sullivan, 2015), although gender egalitarian attitudes predict less time doing housework for both men and women (Treas & Tai, 2016). Feminist social scientists have repeatedly called attention to the inordinate “labors of love” brides/wives/mothers do for husbands and families because of cultural prescriptions assigned to women’s roles in families (e.g., Currie, 1993; Humble, Zvonkovic, & Walker, 2008). Indeed this was codified in U.S. law—“The legal responsibilities of a wife are to live in the home established by her husband: to perform the domestic chores (clearing, cooking, washing, etc.) necessary to help maintain that home; to care for her husband and children” (Schulder, 1970, p. 147), and although the law no longer exists, the sentiment that generate it lingers. Responding to the widespread ideologies of wives in the 1970s, sociologist Ann Oakley (1974), taking up a feminist-Marxist perspective, urged an “ideological revolution” to abolish the role of wife.

Oakley’s call went unrealized, so much so that contemporary women are *still* grappling with decades-old notions of wifehood. Although identity negotiations of contemporary young women take on a different flavor now in

comparison to earlier decades, the notion that women's greatest achievement is being a good wife and mother has not gone away (Sharp & Ganong, 2011) and may even be *amplified* within a postfeminist era. Journalist Emily Matchar (2013) examined what she called "the new domesticity"—a significant minority of (primarily wealthy, White) U.S. women who have left the workplace to be full-time mothers who knit, cook from scratch, and raise chickens in their backyards. In a similar vein, other journalists and some business scholars also have called attention to the "opt-out revolution," referring to a privileged group of highly trained women, "largely working mothers, who choose not to aspire to the corporate executive suite" (Mainiero & Sullivan, 2005, p. 107).

Within the academic literature, feminist scholars have also recently examined the phenomenon of a growing number of women who explicitly endorse an ideology of wifely submission, based primarily on Christian sensibilities (Snyder-Hall, 2008). Other feminist scholars have found that among a sample of Canadian college women, participants "routinely privileged the ideal of wives and mothers" and insisted that their desires were a result of their own choices, not because of societal messages (Jacques & Radtke, 2012, p. 443). This same sentiment has been found in other studies (e.g., Baker, 2008). These ideas are reflective of "choice feminism" (Snyder-Hall, 2010, discussed below). Although most research has not specifically examined young women's aspirations for wifedom and motherhood or investigated wives themselves, a growing number of studies have examined contemporary young women's identities in relation to feminism. Findings consistently reveal that young women express ambivalence to feminism (Aronson, 2003, 2008; Baker, 2010) even as many of these young women may have a feminist subconscious or semiconsciousness because they grew up with expanding options for women. Feminist scholars have characterized the widespread phenomenon of holding antifeminist/feminist ideas simultaneously as postfeminist (Baker, 2008, 2010; Gill, 2007).

### *Postfeminism and Modern Femininity*

Although the definition of postfeminism is contested, it is agreed that "post" reflects *after* feminism. Journalist Natasha Walter described postfeminism as an "illusion of equality," seeing postfeminism as dependent on the assumption circulated repeatedly by the media that everything is equal now, politically, socially, and economically (Walter, 2010). Expanding on this, feminist scholar Gill (2007) argued that postfeminism includes (among other ideas): neoliberalism, which puts a focus on individualism, choice, self-regulation, and empowerment, and a resurgence of "ideas about natural sexual difference" between men and women (p. 147). Gill ultimately argues that postfeminism is an entanglement of feminism and anti-feminism—"What makes

a postfeminist sensibility quite different from both pre-feminist construction of gender and feminist ones, is that it [postfeminism] is clearly a response to feminism” (p. 163). Other feminist scholars have argued that postfeminism has led to the “highly individuated new femininity” (Baker, 2010, p. 188) whereby “reflexive modernization, or individualization in the late modern era has been conceptualized as extensive moves away from tradition . . . with the implication being that girls and women are increasingly untethered by gendered constraints” (Baker, 2010, p. 187). This is subsumed in “choice feminism,” a strand of third-wave feminism. Choice feminism foregrounds the “idea that feminism should simply give women choices and not pass judgement on what they choose” (Snyder-Hall, 2010, p. 255). Some feminist scholars argue that “choice feminism” is highly problematic for two primary reasons: (a) it does not account for structural constraints on women’s choices and (b) not all of women’s choices are *feminist* choices (i.e., some choices bolster patriarchy—e.g., advocating wifely submission, eroticizing male dominance; Marso, 2010).

### *Theoretical Framing: Poststructural Feminism*

Taking postfeminism into account, in this article, I use theoretical ideas drawn from poststructural feminism (Scott, 1988). Poststructuralism posits that individual identities are shaped by widespread cultural discourses (e.g., postfeminism) and practices at any given historical time. Discourses are frequently manifested in ideological binaries (e.g., male/female; heterosexual/homosexual) circulating in society, imposing expectations, and restricting individuals’ opportunities, choices, and behaviors (Alcoff, 1997).

Poststructural *feminism* highlights gendered ideologies and discourses within the wider culture. Here, the focus is on a particular feminine role, that is, wifhood, and the ways in which contemporary wifhood maps onto new feminine subjectivities within late modernity (Baker, 2010; Gill, 2007). I contend that the Betty Crocker–Betty Friedan binary of wifhood is symptomatic of a larger binary conceptualization of wifhood for contemporary young women (i.e., feminist/antifeminist). As with all binaries, the normative category is more clearly defined and accepted, and the marked category is not as crystallized or accepted (Scott, 1988). In this case, Betty Crocker is the more clearly defined category, and Betty Friedan is the marked category.

### **Method**

Through focus groups and individual interviews, trained research assistants collected impressions about being a new wife from 18 wives aged 19 to 32

years (mean age = 23.1 years), who had married for the first time within the previous year of participating in the study and were living in a midsize conservative city in Texas, United States.<sup>2</sup> (Eight of the women were age 22 or younger at the time of becoming a wife.) Seventeen participants identified as Caucasian, and one participant identified as Asian. None had children. Sixteen participants were in college or had graduated from college (nine of whom were graduate students).

Eleven women participated in focus group interviews. Three participants from focus groups also participated in an individual interview. Additionally, seven wives (not part of focus groups) participated in individual interviews. Wives were recruited through flyers and through university-wide e-mail announcements. Participants were compensated with a \$10.00 gift card. Interviews asked participants to describe their wedding days and their transition to marriage. Questions about Betty Crocker or Betty Friedan were not directly asked of participants.

Focus groups and individual interviews were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim and analyzed. I used a modified constructivist grounded theory approach (Charmaz, 2000). Charmaz's adaptation of grounded theory draws from both postmodernism and postpositivism. For this article, I specifically limited my analysis to participants' descriptions of wifehood; other aspects of the data are discussed elsewhere (Sharp, Schrick, Elliot, & Huey, 2016). I also reread Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* and engaged in memoing (Charmaz, 2000). Attempting to be "as open as possible," my analysis of participants' data addressed their meanings, actions, and processes. As part of a larger analysis project, I initially became immersed in the data for several months. As I analyzed, I continually asked, What are the participants expressing? How are their comments linked to wider discourses? What am I learning? I also sought guidance from Lloyd, Emery and Klatt's (2009) analytical processes. Lloyd et al. identified cultural discourses operating and searched for instances of both compliance and resistance to these discourses.

## Findings

New wives' depictions of wifehood were similar both to ideas inherent to the construct of Betty Crocker and to notions reflective of Betty Friedan's questioning of the traditional housewife. A few wives embraced the Betty Crocker image without question, but most experienced tension. Nearly all of the wives' descriptions reflected a fusion of Betty Crocker and Betty Friedan. Endorsement of Betty Crocker images included notions that the ultimate fulfillment of women is the role of wife/mother, wives have a nurturing instinct,



Betty Crocker			Betty Friedan		
1	2	3	4	5	6
1= Feeling that the ultimate fulfillment is being a wife/mother			4= Negotiating household labor with husbands		
2= Believing that wives have a nurturing 'instinct'			5= Expressing dislike for wifehood		
3= Believing that wives want to do household labor			6= Outright rejecting the role of the "little housewife"		

**Figure 1.** Thematic patterns along the continuum of the *Betty Crocker–Betty Friedan Binary*.

Note. 1 = feeling that the ultimate fulfillment is being a wife/mother; 2 = believing that wives have a nurturing “instinct”; 3 = believing that wives want to do household labor; 4 = negotiating household labor with husbands; 5 = expressing dislike for wifehood; 6 = outright rejecting the role of the “little housewife.”

and wives naturally want to do household labor. Evidence of Betty Friedan’s mark was evident when wives insisted on negotiating household labor with their husbands, indicated a dislike for (traditional) wifehood, and verbally rejected the role of a “little housewife.” (See Figure 1 for a depiction of the overarching themes on the continuum of the Crocker–Friedan binary.)

It is necessary to situate participants’ notions of wifehood within a post-feminist, third-wave, choice feminist backdrop (Snyder-Hall, 2010). In a focus group, participants made it clear that contemporary wifehood is individualized, and thus, they could “be the wife they wanted to be”:

Carol (note: all names have been changed): . . . like you can make it [wifehood] . . . *You can be the wife that you wanna be*, you know? . . . Your meaning of wife can be different, ‘cause I’m sure some women would be happy . . . cooking . . . I just don’t wanna do it all the time (laughs), you know?

Jennifer: hmmm. [agreement.]

Carol: But, some people, that’s what they wanna do, and that’s great, and *they’re just as much of a wife as I am*, you know? It’s cool that . . . you’ve made it [being a wife] personal, I guess.

These participants’ claims, while distancing themselves and their choices from the traditional wife, nonetheless describe a range that uses the Betty Crocker ideology as a pole of reference, using wives’ cooking as the illustration. They focused on wives’ personal desires and made claims for authenticity—“They’re just as much of a wife as I am.” Carol herself did not want to cook all the time but assured other wives in the focus group that it was fine if they wanted to cook all the time. Such sentiments reflect “choice feminism,” whereby it does not matter what the choice is (even if choices prop up

patriarchy; Marso, 2010) but what is important is the fact that young women *can* choose for themselves. This sentiment reflects neoliberalism with a narrow focus on the autonomous, self-regulating subject while obscuring the wider context (Baker, 2008).

### *Betty Crocker: Endorsing and Embodying the 1950s Housewife*

Adherence to Betty Crocker primarily took the form of (a) believing that “my calling in life is to be a good wife (and mother),” (b) feeling “compelled” to cook and/or having a nurturing “instinct” activated after getting married, and (c) desiring to cook and clean. The first two reflect a sense of inevitability of wifedom, and the last ideology draws on wider postfeminist and individualist discourses—that is, choices/desires are considered devoid of context (Gill, 2007).

*Believing That “My Calling in Life Is to Be a Good Wife (and Mother).”* Betty Friedan’s overriding critique lay in her exposure of the feminine mystique that promotes marriage and children as the ultimate feminine fulfillment. Affirming this narrow view of feminine achievement, one participant indicated that becoming a wife and mother was her “calling” in life. She emphasized wanting to be the perfect wife, not wanting to do “wrong,” and making her husband a priority before herself.<sup>3</sup> It is worth noting that, in her marriage, she was both the breadwinner (putting her husband through law school) and housekeeper.

Interviewer: Tell me what it is like being a wife?

Lisa: I love it actually, I’ve always been the person that likes to do things for other people . . . before myself and I just always want to try to take care of him and . . . keep the house clean. I love to cook, so I love to cook for him and . . . he’s been out of town, so . . . I’m going to bake him some cookies<sup>4</sup> and . . . I just love to take care of him and, and try to be the best wife that I can be, because he does a lot to make me happy and, and take care of me and so I just want to try and reciprocate that.

Interviewer: So tell me what it means to you to be a wife. What do you think a wife should be?

Lisa: Well I think a wife should be someone who is supporting him and loving and you always hear of older men griping about how their wives nag and I try really hard not to nag (laughing) . . . I just want to be there for him and, and just to make him happy because he makes me really happy. [. . .]

Interviewer: Think back to the early days of being a wife, the first few days or week after you were married. Tell me about some of your thoughts in your new role.

Lisa: I remember just being really excited . . . *I just always felt my calling in life was to be a good wife and be a good mother and that's something that I've always dreamed about* I guess. I've always waited my whole life I knew that that's what I was made for and what I wanted to do and . . . I think I was just really excited and I really focused on trying to be the perfect wife and do all the right things. [ . . . ]

Interviewer: . . . What would the perfect wife do or not do?

Lisa: . . . not nag (laughs). My husband's always like "don't nag." So . . . don't do that, I guess be a good housekeeper . . . and it's actually not, because my husband loves to cook too, so we kinda share in the cooking responsibilities . . . The perfect wife doesn't necessarily have to be a good cook. To just do good for her husband, I think is the main thing and . . . listen to him and share in his dreams and his goals and, and just be supportive and loving.

In this participant's account, she explains that she has been "waiting" all her life to get married and become a wife and a mother. Much like the feminine narrative in the 1940s and 1950s in America, this contemporary woman's expressions make it clear that she views marriage and children as the ultimate feminine fulfillment. She further elucidates her desires to share *his* goals and dreams and "just be supportive and loving." This is reminiscent of Betty Friedan's argument that housewives lost their identities in their husbands. For Lisa, "losing" her identity in her husband's was not an issue—this is the way a wife should structure her life. There is no question that his goals are her priorities. In contrast to Lisa's acceptance, another wife in the study (Becky) struggled with losing her identity in her husband's desires and goals:

Becky: . . . And so when we got married and we were kind of adjusting all of this stuff . . . trying to get the next 3 or 4 years planned while we were in school . . . And I kinda felt like I had an identity crisis a little bit (laughing). I mean not really by any means but *it kinda felt like I got lost in what my husband wanted*. Does that make sense? Like my career and my goals were secondary to his. And that's probably just cause . . . I think women tend to sacrifice more; put themselves out more or are more willing to give things up . . . and not that my husband is selfish or anything. So I just kind of let go of everything . . . that wasn't in line with his goals. And *so that was really hard for me cause I felt like I lost kind of my ambition and my sense of purpose* (laugh) . . . *for a lot of things I was doing*. So that was hard (laughing), but I don't know . . . I guess what I'm trying to say is I was more extreme in being his supporter and his encourager and his everything like it was all about him. And I got lost in that . . . when I was first married and then as time progressed and I realized, "Well if I don't do something then, I'm not really going to feel fulfilled in life or satisfied" and so

. . . that's when we kinda better merged our goals so that I could have goals. Because . . . he was ambitious, I guess because he was really against me working and like "I wanna stay at home with our kids at least when they're small but I don't know if I want to stay at home when they're all in school or you know until they start school, but you know I think it would be nice to stay at home with them until their 2 or 3 cause they grow so fast and so we were totally in line on that." But . . . then he was like, "Well you're going to be a stay-at-home wife" like his mom was just stay at home the whole . . . time, she still doesn't work and everybody is in college and moved out. And so I just kind of was like "I want to work, I want to have a career of some kind." I know it won't be the focus because both of us have the goal to have me at home when they're small but . . . when they start school, I don't want to be at home all day alone . . .

In Becky's response, she alluded to her husband's understandings of how wives should enact wifhood (one that resonates with the image of Betty Crocker). She tells us that his conception of wifhood comes from the family he grew up in, whereby his mother was a "stay-at-home wife" and he thinks his wife should be the same. Pondering questions similar to that of Betty Friedan, Becky is not convinced that a wife has to live her life this way. At the time of the interview, she was working on a master's degree and expressed desire to pursue her career in business. After talking to her husband, her revised career goal was to obtain a teaching certificate (largely) because this fits the schedule of their (hypothetical) children. Here, she resisted the Betty Crocker push coming from her husband. Yet she also endorsed notions from Betty Crocker as she naturalized why wives put their husbands' goals above theirs. She stated, ". . . I think women tend to sacrifice more; put themselves out more or are more willing to give things up, . . . not that my husband is selfish or anything . . ." She defended her husband by saying his actions are not selfish; drawing on gender essentialism, she surmises, "It is just the way that women are—they more willing to 'give things up.'" And she is questioning a need to change her career or to put her career on hold at least 2 or 3 years while their (hypothetical) children are young.

*Feeling Compulsion to Cook and Be Nurturing.* Beyond the prescription of a "calling in her life" and the husband's prescriptions for his wife (Becky), both largely unquestioned, there was another way in which practices of the iconic 1950s wife appeared inevitable. Two participants suggested that women doing household labor is inescapable, because of biological proclivities. These wives endorsed a strong essentialist view of the Betty Crocker image.

Interviewer: . . . Now that you are wife, what does that mean to you?

Megan: . . . I never thought of myself as a wife as going to be a housewife, because I said before we ever got engaged that I didn't want children, I

didn't want to stay at the house, I wanted to have a career . . . A wife with a career, what do you do? Cause I still, especially then, *but I still now feel a compulsion to cook*. A lot more than when I got married . . . I didn't feel like I needed to be in that stereotypical extremely subservient, keep the house spotless, cook, bring me a drink, rub my feet, go away I'm going to watch the news kind of thing or anything, but I did kind of feel . . . I had the urge to cook. *I guess it was my provider instinct*. I felt that in my new role as a wife that I kind of needed to nurture a little bit more than I otherwise would have and be . . . a bit more supportive than I would have before . . . so, those were my big two things about thinking about my new role as a wife were thinking about ways to nurture and ways to be supportive . . .

Her statement—"A wife with a career . . . what do you do?"—suggests that the conceptualization of wife does not encompass a career. Megan is aware that there is not script for her and implies that she needs to be creative. In other words, she does not have a blueprint, illustrating how the feminist (Betty Friedan) pole of the wife binary is less crystallized than the Betty Crocker image. Indeed, she then clearly articulates the Betty Crocker blueprint and quickly denounces "stereotypical" extreme expectations assigned to this version of a housewife. Nonetheless, she believes an "instinct" is at the root of her increased cooking and "nurturing."

*Wanting to Cook and Clean (Society Is Not Telling Me to Cook and Clean)*. Other justifications for wives doing most (if not all) of the cooking and cleaning stemmed from appeals to personal choice. The wives made a point to say that society did not require that they cook and clean. Thus, in these remarks, the wives implicitly reference and refute Betty Friedan's claims that societal notions forced them into a narrow image of femininity. Drawing on postfeminist thought, I argue that the wives' discourse evidences a strong individualism and asserts the primacy of self-determination. Their framing (i.e., "No one is telling me to cook and clean, I just want to") is reflective of the illusion of equality (Walter, 2010) and choice feminism (Snyder-Hall, 2010). These choice/desire statements, though, are contradictory with other statements from interviews, suggesting that there remains considerable social pressure for wives to enact a Betty Crocker version of wifehood.

Interviewer: Tell me what it's like being a wife?

Gina: . . . I think it's fun for the most part. I feel like now that I have a husband though I feel like I kind of have to clean more and cook, not that women are supposed to be like that all the time but . . . I feel like I just *want* to, you know? . . . You want to be a provider, caregiver, or

whatever so I clean up a little bit more and I cook and I do . . . laundry because I think if he did it he would ruin our clothes . . . But . . . it's really fun . . .

In this excerpt, Gina began her response telling us that being a wife is “fun” and then hedged her description of fun by saying “for the most part” and then said “I kind of have to clean more and cook more”—her expression “have to” suggests a sense of obligation. She quickly clarified, however, by saying that “not that women are supposed to be like that all the time.” This later phrase moved her analysis to other women (cultural concerns/prescriptions) and brought in temporality (not all the time). She then declared that “she feels like she wants to,” suggestive of her own desires. I argue that her thoughts reflect postfeminism sensibility here—if everyone is equal, women have choices so, when she endorses a 1950s image of cooking and cleaning, it is her choice. As Ann Oakley (1974) maintained decades ago, the argument “some women like it [household labor]” is problematic.

. . . This contention ignores the shaping of women's identity by their social situation. It is not merely what a woman wants that is at issue, but what she is induced to want, and what she is prevented—by social attitudes—from believing she can have, or be. Molded in this fashion by restrictive stereotypes, the majority of women do not have any serious option but to confirm. Thus they affirm their status: “We are happy, we like being housewives.” (p. 229)

Oakley (1974) also raised the issue of the “social expectation that women ought to be satisfied with dreary work” (p. 232), and more recently, scholars continue to put focus on these “labors of love” and the ways in which contemporary desires are shaped by male-dominated society (Snyder-Hall, 2008).

### ***Betty Friedan: Rebuffing Betty Crocker 1950s Housewife Image***

Labors of love were not fully taken for granted, though, and the questioning of the narrow image of Betty Crocker was also brought into focus in the interviews with new wives. Betty Friedan's ideas were evident when wives insisted on negotiating household labor with their husbands, indicated dissatisfaction with being a wife, and espoused a rejection of becoming a “little housewife.” Friedan's indelible mark was reflected in the very questioning of the 1950s image and a consideration of alternative practices. The wives, though, did not fully liberate themselves from 1950s stereotypes, and traces of Crocker remained.

There were only two instances in the interviews that participants explicitly mentioned feminism or women's rights, and both instances were in the context of explaining why they took their husband's surname. One wife told us that she considered hyphenating her maiden name with her husband's, but she said, in the end, "I wanted to be more traditional" and her "hesitation came from the fact that [she was] an only child . . ." She said that she "didn't really have a good answer" when asked why she decided to take his surname and evaluated herself by saying,

And that's disappointing . . . I would like to have a good answer . . . I wanted . . . that traditional part of it and even though I'm all about women's rights and if you can do it, we can do it, too . . .

Another participant told us she also paused about changing her name and then decided to go with her husband's surname because "just tradition . . . honestly . . . I am not enough of an uber-feminist (laughs) to really think it's worth fighting to keep my name . . ." Although both examples end with traditional decisions, the fact that the young wives raised questions is indicative of a feminist sensibility, and Snyder-Hall (2008) argued that such questioning and personal dilemmas—even if the end choice does not appear to be feminist—is part of the feminist struggle.

*Negotiating Household Labor With Husbands (Make Sure He "Helps")*. Indicative of the feminism espoused by Betty Friedan, some wives refused to do all the household labor, believing that such an arrangement was not fair and that they did not enjoy the work (except some who enjoyed cooking). As sociologists Ann Oakley (1974) and Jessie Bernard (1972/1982) pointed out, most household labor is "dreary work," does not require aptitude, and is largely devalued, a situation that has remained consistent for decades (England, 2010). Despite their rebuffing of the heteropatriarchal order and the concomitant regulation of labor, wives discussed the unfair division of labor as an individual issue (thus, not linked to larger politics or ideology), ultimately endorsing the fundamental claim that household labor was the woman's domain. Thus, wives initiated discussions about household labor and left the impression that the responsibility for the labor lay squarely on their shoulders. One participant shared her "jaded" perspective of wifehood:

Mindy: . . . from a jaded perspective what it means to be a wife is someone who just accepts the fact that they have to work two times harder than a man, . . . twice as hard with household type responsibilities . . . and I think that even from a nonjaded perspective that that's true and women

do so much more . . . but I always viewed marriage as that it isn't smart for women to get into because of that stress it puts on them [ . . . ]

Interviewer: . . . now I'm gonna ask you some questions about your role as a wife. Tell me what it's like being a wife?

Mindy: . . . as an undergrad . . . I learned what happens in marriages and I also learned about what ways you can make it work, you know what I mean? And I learned it from a sociological perspective, research-wise and I also learned it as, well, he [her husband] and I started to become more Christian so that played a huge role in how I was gonna interpret . . . my expectations as a wife. Now a lot of people might think that gender stereotypes take place as soon as you bring religion into it and it doesn't have to be that way. . . . my roles as a wife came to me, . . . , as I was . . . dating him and getting a feeling of what marriage would be like . . . and so I just pretty much came up with a set of rules for myself and I talked with him, I talked to him about them and he was pretty much okay with all of them as well . . .

Interviewer: Can you tell me about those rules?

Mindy: . . . yeah, they were like how we're going to divide up housework . . . and how I don't even expect things to even be fair or 50/50 because that's not, I don't see that as being realistic, but things needed to feel okay by both of us and that's something that I still stress to this day. . . . those rules include things like . . . how to clean the house. Who's gonna vacuum? . . . Who's gonna mow the lawn? Who's in charge of dishes and trash? So household chores, spending money is something we talked about and squared away . . .

Mindy indicated that she had exposure to sociological research, and this exposure helped her consider household labor in her marriage. She also revealed that she and her husband espouse Christian values, and she indicated that Christianity influenced her choices. Although pushing for shared household labor, she believed that equality in domestic work was unrealistic and that, ultimately, the responsibility fell on her shoulders. Thus, she had been the one to initiate dialogue and to create the "rules." Her need to invent rules is another example of the diffuse/abstract nature of the marked category (Betty Friedan/feminist image of wife).

*Expressing Dissatisfaction With Wifehood.* Although dissatisfaction was evident in the aforementioned statements, Mindy did not directly state her dissatisfaction with wifehood, as other participants did. One wife, in particular, indicated her frustration and disappointment with wifehood. Exposing her unhappiness, she baldly said, "I don't like being a wife" and pointed to the



nebulous pressure she felt to enact stereotypical practices in order to be a “good” wife. Indeed, as Sara Ahmed (2010) recently wrote,

The happy housewife is a fantasy figure that erases the signs of labor under the sign of happiness. The claim that women are happy and that this happiness is behind the work they do functions to justify gendered forms of labor not as products of nature, law, or order, but as expressions of collective wish and desire. (pp. 572-573)

Interviewer: How did you react to being a wife?

Becky: I didn't like it. I mean, . . . I like having a husband I guess but I don't really like being a wife 'cause I feel like it's so stereotypical (laughing). Like I'm supposed to be at home and clean and make the dinner . . . I guess I just have a lot of the stereotypical images of what a wife is and so . . . I felt a lot of pressure to do all those things. . . . when the real semester started and summer school was over, I just had a lot on my plate; that was my first graduate course I was taking and working and all of that and so, but then I still felt like all this pressure to keep the house clean and do his laundry and to make his meals and all this crazy stuff and so I didn't like it. I didn't like being a wife.

Interviewer: And now?

Becky: I like it better (laughing). I still struggle with those things a little bit honestly. Because I feel like there's just a lot of pressure on the wife to keep the house and to be supportive of her husband. And I think husbands have pressures on them too, but they're different. I'm not trying to say that . . . like he might not like being a husband cause he feels like he has to take care of me and all this other stuff, but . . . And that's not necessarily stuff I enjoy either, like I don't like cleaning and doing laundry and cooking and all this stuff . . . like I don't want to cook for him all the time but I don't know, it's cheaper so we do it, we cook. But it's just like a lot of pressure to do things that you don't particularly like for somebody else and it's good 'cause you know you serve them and then you learn to love them more and appreciate them and all that kind of stuff but it's still hard. I mean there's still days that I'm like I'm not going to cook you dinner (laughing). But when I was first married I thought, “Oh I'm going to be a bad wife if I say that,” you know 'cause I wanted to be the perfect wife. And I think people feel like that . . . they want to keep a perfect house and be able to work and you know do everything and just realistically it's not possible. But I still find it hard to find time to take care of myself and so that's why, like I'm kind of over the whole cooking and cleaning and all that stuff cause and we

talked and he helps now. So it's better but it's still kind of hard to take care of myself and not take care of him. That's not how I wanted to say that . . . *like I find it hard to take care of myself before him*. Does that make sense? Like meet my needs before his needs. So like his needs always come first to me and my needs are always second and so I still struggle with that because if I'm not taking care of myself, am I really doing a good job taking care of him. 'cause you have to take care of yourself to take care of somebody else. And like I'm still trying to balance that and that's a really hard part of being a wife, is maybe letting him suffer so that I can take care of myself right now . . .

In the above statement, the wife shares her misgivings about refusing aspects of the Betty Crocker role early in her marriage. She believed that she would be a "bad wife" if she did not cook his dinner. This statement is suggestive of how powerful the Betty Crocker image remains in (some) newlywed's lives. Now, after being married longer, she is able to negotiate the cooking, and he now "helps." Similar to the previous quote, the cooking remained the wife's domain and the husband offers assistance/relief from time to time. That this remains a source of grief is significant, indicating Betty Crocker remains in the cultural subconscious.

**Resisting Betty Crocker Outright: "I Am Not Cooking and Cleaning for You."** Confronting the trappings of good wife, other participants told their husbands outright that they were not going to embrace the Betty Crocker image. As we see in the statement below, that the wife needed to make such a proclamation is suggestive (again) of the power of the Betty Crocker image. In this case, she was dislodging her husband's expectations of her to embody the iconic image of Betty Crocker baking.

Carol: . . . I understood what he meant by . . . he's the head of the house, and I'm finally okay with that, but . . . I flat out told him, *I'm not gonna sit in the kitchen and bake for him*. . . . I'm going to college so that I can work [. . .] So, I'm glad I haven't turned into that, I guess. I mean I didn't expect him to force that on me, but it's turned out nice that we could share things and, I don't know . . . it [being married] hasn't changed [our relationship] that much . . .

Throughout the interview, Carol offered several contradictory ideas. Here, she discusses her hesitancy for having her husband as the "head of the house" and tells us that she has accepted his claims to authority ("I'm finally okay with that"). At the same time, she referenced the iconic image of a housewife

baking, refusing to engender practices associated with this image. Or, one might be inclined to see this as her retreating to what she can control. That is, she can claim certain proscribed authority by rejecting some of the trappings but not the real root cause of the wifely inequality.

Susan: I was not raised to be a wife (laughs). . . . my parents divorced when I was 12 . . . so I remember my mom doing everything for my dad, and . . . no matter what she did, he was never happy with it. So, after that . . . it was just us three girls. My mom, my sister, and I, and so it was like, “Oh, no, no, no, no. We don’t cater anymore. I don’t think so.” We had a dog, and even she was a girl. So, you know, the three of us, we all compromised . . . end of discussion. So, when it came . . . , when [my husband] and I kinda got together and I . . . got to know his family, his sister does everything for his brother-in-law . . . So, it was just like, his brother-in-law, he’s a hardworking man. Don’t get me wrong, but like I don’t think it’s very fair that she gets to go to work all day, she comes home, and then she still works. I’m like, “There needs like a 50-50 street.” So, with my husband, it’s like, “Look, I’m not catering to you. *I am not gonna be your little housewife* . . . I work, you work, we both go to school, we can figure this out together.” So, . . . I don’t feel like doing the laundry, I’m like, “You know, I really could use some clean clothes right now, but I don’t have time ‘cause I . . . have to study or something,” so I’ll just let them pile up or, or, you know, like the dishes and that stuff . . .

In this excerpt, Susan described other marriages (her husband’s sister) that endorse the Betty Crocker image and suggested that her husband assumed their marriage would operate similarly. (Note: in the description, Susan defends her brother-in-law as someone who works hard.) Like Carol, Susan directly (to her husband) refused to embrace the Betty Crocker image of wifhood. She made a case for egalitarian values and practices, but in the end, the responsibility for household labor was hers. If she cannot do the dishes or laundry, neither gets done—as she expressed, “I’ll just let them [the dishes or laundry] pile up.”

## Discussion

Returning to the exercise at the beginning of the article, this study shows how powerful the Betty Crocker/1950s conceptualization of wifhood *still* is among a sample of contemporary young wives, adding to the wider dialogue about a resurgence of domesticity (Baker, 2010; Snyder-Hall, 2010) and offering a contemporary feminist critique of wifhood within the

family science literature. The 1950s traditional housewife image embodied in the mythical Betty Crocker was a crystallized, ideological anchor for the wives in the sample. The Betty Crocker blueprint did not go unchallenged, though, as many of the young wives engaged in critical questioning of the stereotypical traditional 1950s housewife. With the unique focus on meanings assigned to contemporary wifhood, this study extends the growing discussion of the “new femininity” within a postfeminist era (Baker, 2010; Gill, 2007). Wifhood, as perceived and embodied by the new wives in the sample, reflected an integration of feminism and antifeminism, including elements of neoliberalism and gender essentialism (Gill, 2007).

### *Wifhood Within a Postfeminist Era*

Hallmark elements of postfeminism include neoliberalism and gender essentialism (Gill, 2007). Neoliberalist sensibilities, linked to choice feminism, were evident throughout the data and were especially pronounced when participants repeatedly conceptualized the role of wife as individualized. Participants expressed a calling to be a wife/mother and interpreted their desires (compulsions) to cook and clean as individual choices, devoid of a wider context of influence. Although personal agency is a value of feminism, poststructural feminism situates choices within larger structural constraints. Desires are socially constructed, and all women have to contend with the “demands of femininity,” referring to the “cultural dynamics and internalized desires to keep women tied to a traditional sex/gender system” (Marso, 2006, as cited in Snyder-Hall, 2008, p. 581). Neoliberalism has

. . . create[d] new modes of subordination which work at a psychological level to regulate women . . . repressive dictates [i.e., cultural prescriptions during the 1950s] have been replaced by the active participation of women in assenting to the often disadvantageous conditions of their lives. (Baker, 2010, p. 62)

Extending ideas of gender essentialism beyond women’s preferences, scholars have indicated that there has been an increase in beliefs about biological gender essentialism (Gill, 2007). Journalist Emily Matchar discussed biological gender essentialism as a central theme in the rise of the *new domesticity*. In a similar vein, a couple of wives in the present study indicated that wives have biological capacities to nurture. One wife (Megan) even went as far to depict her emotional labor as a wife resulting from her “provider instinct” that appeared after she became a wife. Using the word “instinct” was striking because Megan was trained as a biologist. The fact that Megan is highly educated and espoused erroneous ideas of sex/gender raises

concern. Although other participants did not endorse scientific inaccuracies, the fact that the women in the sample, half of whom were graduate students, did speak to the persistence of the Betty Crocker image.

In addition to the present sample being highly educated, women were primarily White, heterosexual, and middle- to upper-class—similar characteristics that Betty Crocker embodies and similar to Betty Friedan's sample. All women in both Friedan's and the present sample inhabit(ed) structurally privileged positions. The focus on a highly privileged group of women has been one of the strongest critiques waged against Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique*. Her analysis and the present analysis was/is limited to a narrow segment of the population, obfuscating the lives and experiences of women of color and working-class women and women living in poverty (Coontz, 2011).

### *The Question of Happiness*

Do the data from the present study suggest that the feminine mystique still exists (at least among the most privileged)? Would it be accurate to claim that new wives are unhappy and discontent with wifehood? Were the new wives' jobs simply to support their husbands or were they pursuing their own careers? Betty Friedan (1963) pushed women to have goals beyond wifehood and motherhood, and she rarely found "happy" housewives; when she did, she discovered all of them had substantial interests and commitments outside the home. Has this too stayed the same or changed? In this study, there were traces of discontent and dissatisfaction, as well as declarations of happiness. Unlike the wives of the period within which Betty Friedan wrote her book, wives today were able to articulate their dissatisfaction and make demands of their husbands that contradicted the ideology embodied in the fictional image of Betty Crocker. Perhaps this is suggestive of Coontz's (2005) description of individualized marriages and speaks to the "semiconscious" feminist ideas (Stacey, 1991, as cited in Aronson, 2008) that young women are likely to hold.

Despite such important disruptions, the ideology that motivates the Betty Crocker image has remained intact (especially as seen in the wives' default position on household labor). Additionally, unlike the wives in Betty Friedan's study, none of these new wives had children. Although having children might be a compulsory experience for many of the wives, the wife in the sample who did not want to have children suggested a disruption to the "motherhood mandate" (Russo, 1976) and maps onto Coontz's notion of individualized marriage. It would be instructive to return to the wives after they have children and compare/contrast their experiences to those of Betty Friedan's participants. Another important line of future work would be to examine ideas about perfection and wifehood. As the data indicated, many wives alluded to

wanting and trying to be the “perfect” wife. Although analysis of perfection was beyond the scope of this study, in another article from the same data set, the author has examined social pressure for perfectionism on women’s wedding days and linked perfectionism to everyday femininity within postfeminism (Sharp et al., 2016).

### ***The Power of Betty Crocker: Are U.S. Marriages Actually Deinstitutionalized?***

Finally, I would like to shift the discussion to the larger enterprise of social science and research examining marriage in late modernity. In the present study, the wives’ narratives were counter to both Jessie Bernard’s predictions in the *Future of Marriage* (1972/1982) and Cherlin’s (2004) argument that marriage has become deinstitutionalized and Coontz’s (2005) account of individualized marriages. Bernard had predicted that structural constraints of marriage would be fundamentally loosened. In a similar vein, Cherlin’s and Coontz’s arguments have rested, in part, on claims that strong gendered behaviors/expectations/roles within marriage were no longer driving contemporary understandings and experiences of marriage. Although wives’ roles may be less clear, the findings from the sample interviewed suggest that there are still powerful gendered structural constraints.

The present study is responsive to feminist scholars’ call for feminists to reengage with critical analyses of marriage (e.g., Brook, 2002) and heterosexuality (Jackson, 2006; Tolman, 2012). The findings indicated that the 1950s housewife is *not* a relic of the past, mapping on to other feminist family scholars’ work documenting the continued unfair division of labor among men and women (Pfeffer, 2010; Yavorsky et al., 2015) and wider patriarchal discourses circulating about heterosexual romance (Jaramillo-Sierra & Allen, 2013; Sharp & Keyton, 2016). This article offered one way forward by exposing the false binary of Betty Crocker–Betty Friedan, showcasing how contemporary women’s preferences eerily reflect a century-old fictional character. In response, a more crystallized blueprint of Betty Friedan’s critique of wifedom is urgently needed. Failing this, Betty Crocker will continue to haunt the kitchens of U.S. families.

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## Notes

1. The first, fourth, and last excerpts were from data collected in the current century. The second and fifth excerpts were taken from housewives' interviews in Betty Friedan's famous work, *The Feminine Mystique*, and the third excerpt is from the Betty Crocker "homemaker's creed of the home legion."
2. A caveat: Even though the data were collected in West Texas (conservative area), this does not suggest that the ideas emerging from the data are limited to West Texas. As with many studies, the influence of the background of the individual storytellers varied. For example, four of the wives had only recently moved to Texas, and approximately half of the wives mentioned Christianity as salient model in their lives. Additionally, in qualitative analysis, researchers are not generalizing from a sample to a population. Instead, analytic generalizability is sought, whereby the findings have resonance. Participants are considered "carriers of meaning"—their stories may help reveal something about wider ideas circulating in society at a particular time.
3. During the interview, she did not offer a developed picture of her husband. Instead, when discussing his good qualities, she mentioned them in the abstract, yet when discussing his negative qualities, she mentioned specific complaints (e.g., his underwear on the floor). Her advice to other new wives was "not to nag."
4. Baking cookies, of course, is symbolic of one of the most recognizable of Betty Crocker's activities.

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