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Effects of Breadwinner Status on Marital Satisfaction: How Income Disparity Between Spousal Partners Affects Happiness

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Abstract
Previous research shows mixed results when it comes to the effect of the breadwinner status on marital satisfaction. Our purpose is to examine whether who has the higher income in a marriage, the man or the woman, has an effect on the reported marital satisfaction of the couple. Using the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth (2000) we examined this question. We found that who the breadwinner is has no effect on marital satisfaction. These results are encouraging for women who aspire to high-status, high-paying careers. Our findings indicate that women should not hold back from these aspirations on account of a concern for jeopardizing their chances of marital satisfaction.

Hypothesis
We hypothesize that if the woman’s income is greater than that of her husband’s in a marriage relationship, they will be less satisfied with their marriage than those couples that adhere to traditional gender roles. Further, we hypothesize that these trends will be accentuated for couples who are members of traditional religions, or who live in areas that hold to more to traditional gender roles.

Methods
Sample
• Marriages in which the husband’s income exceeds his wife’s (N=542)
• Marriages in which the wife’s income exceeds her husband’s (N=1994)

Instrument
• NLSY (National Longitudinal Survey of Youth, 2000)
• Targeted 2,536 marriages where either the husband’s or wife’s income exceeds spouses

Data
• Outcome Measure
  • Marital satisfaction in relationships where wife’s income is greater than her husband’s

Independent Variables
• Sex of primary income earner
• Race
• Religiousity
• Region
• Sex

Results
In our first regression analysis, we tested “marital happiness.” We found that in situations where the wife’s income exceeded her husband’s, religious affiliation, frequency of religious attendance, and respondent’s region, all proved to not be statistically significant. The unstandardized coefficient indicated that African Americans reported .104 more units of marital happiness than the Caucasian control group.

In the regression analysis testing the frequency of marital laughter, income disparity, frequency of religious attendance, what region the respondent was from, and other race were not found to be statistically significant findings. The unstandardized coefficient indicated that respondents who reported being members of a religion laughed .200 units more than respondents who identified with a religion. African American’s degree of laughter was the only other statistically significant independent variable in our second regression, and was significant at a .05 level. The unstandardized coefficient indicated that African Americans laughed .107 units more than the Caucasian control group.

In our third regression, we looked at how often the married couples argued about money and chores. In this regression, the only independent variable that was statistically significant was the African American variable. The unstandardized coefficient indicated that African Americans argued .200 units more than Caucasians at a .05 level.

Conclusions
Our findings indicate that, contrary to our hypothesis, conformity to traditional gender roles about breadwinner and caretaker status does not affect marital satisfaction. In fact, the sex of primary breadwinner does not increase or decrease marital satisfaction a significant amount. We believe that this is an indication of the changing gender roles, and their societal norms. These results are encouraging for women who aspire to high-status, high-paying careers. Our findings indicate that women should not hold back from these aspirations on account of a concern for jeopardizing their chances of marital satisfaction.