

Rethinking the marriage wage premium.

Dalrock | 21 July, 2013 | by Dalrock

A number of commenters on my [last post](#) wanted more evidence that marriage as an institution motivates men to earn more. Commenter Drew asked:

I think the jumps from correlations to narrative/causation is a little sloppy. For example, do the married men make more because they are higher motivated to do so? Or are they a fully developed and self motivated character that naturally results in more financial success and able to attract women in general to marriage?

This is a very common question for the academics who study the marriage wage premium, and numerous studies have found that the differences in wages between married and unmarried men can't be explained solely by the selection bias regarding which men are able to marry. A 2004 article by Professor Hal R. Varian in the New York Times titled [Analyzing the Marriage Gap](#) describes one such study. Professor Caplan reviews the competing theories in his article [What Is the Male Marriage Premium?](#)

However, while selection bias can't explain the entire difference, there are a number of plausible reasons to believe that selection bias explains part of it. The NY Times article linked above focuses on several selection related hypotheses, including the possibility that better looking men are both more likely to earn more money and to get married. But Drew's conjecture is for a more direct selection bias, that women are selecting husbands based on their estimated future income potential. This certainly makes sense, but notice that nested in this question is the assumption that men are competing to be picked for marriage by signaling provider potential. Put another way, men are competing for sexual access to the most attractive women. Under a marriage based system men compete for sexual access by competing to marry, and men compete to marry in part by signaling their ability to provide. This of course fits my original assertion, that marriage motivates men to work harder and earn more. There is no conflict between my original assertion and Drew's question; we are saying the same thing in different ways.

The problem we have is as large numbers of women continue to postpone marriage past their most attractive years (and marriage is more and more [debased](#)) signaling provider status becomes less and less an efficient strategy for men competing for sexual access to the most attractive women. This is of course what [Roissy](#) and [Roosh](#) have explained in great detail.

Commenter GK Chesterton raised another common theory regarding why married men earn more money:

I'd like to see more on this especially pushing further back. I know people have done studies on the economic benefits that families afford in specialization. That is, mom can take care of the kids exclusively and dad can earn. It might be interesting to see household output in economic activity based on married or not married. That way you can tally single men and women against married couples.

While traditional wives certainly add great economic value to the family as a whole, the specialization argument falls flat in my opinion when considering the question of married men's higher earnings. The problem with the argument is it assumes married men are free to focus more of their time and mental energy on paid work than unmarried men. If this were correct, married men should then be free to *work longer hours* and *travel more* for business than unmarried men. The basic assumption is that bachelors are too tied down focusing on housekeeping, cooking meals from scratch, and doing their laundry to really focus on paid work. This is to put it mildly, counter-intuitive. I did a [quick google search](#) on the question and the top two results ([here](#) and [here](#)) refute the specialization theory. The fundamental

problem with the specialization theory is that it overlooks what marriage provides to men (aside from sexual access). Marriage is the way men set out to have a family, and the economic value of a traditional wife is greatest within that context. Having a family *increases* the demands on the man's time, but the specialization benefit of a traditional wife helps to offset the extra demands the married man has taken on. Either way, the economic benefit of specialization would show up in greater *household wealth*, not in greater earnings for the man. Just to be clear, I'm not questioning the substantial economic contribution of traditional wives; I'm merely pointing out that it doesn't plausibly explain why married men earn more than unmarried men.

But there is a more simple way to test whether marriage motivates men to earn more. Starting roughly 40 years ago western society decided to dismantle marriage. Core to this process has been to address the issue of motivation for men. Family courts know that if a man is ejected from his family he will have less incentive to financially provide for his (now ex) wife and children. The same goes for men supporting illegitimate children and their mother. This is the whole point of child support and alimony, to replace the motivation marriage would otherwise create. When the family is intact the man has an incentive to provide not just for himself, but for his wife and children. While most men would still provide for their children even if they aren't part of his household, it is widely accepted that his lack of status as husband and head of household will mean a reduction in his willingness to provide for his children. The same is even more true regarding support for the wife. But the courts know that just mandating child support and alimony aren't sufficient to make up for the former motivation provided by the institution they replace (marriage). Coercing men to make these payments lacks the ability to motivate the man to earn as much as he would have earned were he head of household, so there is less income for the courts to transfer to the woman and child(ren). As a result, family courts now take the extraordinary measure of calculating the amount of income they believe the man is capable of making, and then imputing that income to him when calculating how much child support he must pay, as Dr. Stephen Baskerville [explains](#):

Though ostensibly limited by guidelines, a judge is free to order virtually any amount in child support.⁴⁰ A judge who decides that a father could be earning more than he does can “*impute*” potential income to the father and assess child support and extract attorneys' fees based on that imputed income.

If marriage didn't create a substantial incentive for men to earn more, there would be no need to artificially reproduce this incentive when creating a system to replace marriage. While economic studies are helpful, this is a matter of basic sense.

Commenter *They Call Me Tom* offered another common sense explanation for the differences we see in the earnings of married vs unmarried men:

Wow... to put it shortly. I mean some things seem to make sense... I always said during the layoffs in architecture over the last few years, that I'm certain it was easy enough for me to absorb four or five months out of work, but that I could only imagine how rough it was for the men with wives and children. It's easy to tighten your own belt, but to tighten the belt of your wife and children? It has to create a sense of desperation (and as put in the article above... more ambition).

That married men are under significantly more pressure to produce earnings than unmarried men is something nearly universally understood, yet when the topic of the marriage earnings “premium” comes up this basic fact is somehow overlooked. This comes from the all too common interaction between the feminist and conservative viewpoints. Feminists view marriage as enslaving women, and are generally

reluctant to acknowledge the efforts of husbands. The posture of conservatives however is less intuitive, but they also tend to greatly downplay the sacrifice of husbands. This flows out of the chivalrous view of conservatives, where men taking credit for their sacrifices is seen as in poor form. However, we know that conservatives do know men are taking on a significant burden when they marry, as they are very open about this whenever they scold unmarried men as slackers. As Pastor Driscoll [puts it](#):

Men are like trucks: they drive straighter with a weighted load. Young men are supposed to load themselves up first by being responsible for themselves and not expecting their mom to fill up their sippy cup with beer and push them in a stroller to the unemployment line. Young men who take responsibility for themselves are then ready to marry and take responsibility for the life and joy of their wife.

The problem is the denial from both feminists and conservatives has lead to a widespread failure to recognize how important to society marriage really is. Child support and imputed income can't replace marriage, and the sooner we are honest about this the better for all involved.

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