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On-site Press Room (Aug. 13-17): Hilton Atlanta, Room 202, (404) 572-6511

EMBARGOED until Monday, August 16, 8:30 a.m. EST

Men More Likely to Cheat If They Are Economically Dependent on Their Female Partners

Economic dependency has the opposite effect on women

ATLANTA — The more economically dependent a man is on his female partner, the more likely he is to cheat on her, according to research to be presented at the 105th Annual Meeting of the American Sociological Association.

“But for women, economic dependency seems to have the opposite effect: the more dependent they are on their male partners, the less likely they are to engage in infidelity,” said Christin Munsch, a sociology Ph.D. candidate at Cornell University, and author of the study, “The Effect of Relative Income Disparity on Infidelity for Men and Women.”

According to the study, which examined 18- to 28-year-old married and cohabitating respondents who were in the same relationship for more than a year, men who were completely dependent on their female partner’s income were five times more likely to cheat than men who contributed an equal amount of money to the partnership. The relationship between economic dependence and infidelity disappeared when age, education level, income, religious attendance, and relationship satisfaction were taken into account.

“One or more of these variables is impacting the relationship,” Munsch said. “For example, it may be that men who make less money than their partners are more unhappy and cheat because they are unhappy, not necessarily because they make less money.”

Ironically, men who make significantly more than their female partners were also more likely to cheat. “At one end of the spectrum, making less money than a female partner may threaten men’s gender identity by calling into question the traditional notion of men as breadwinners,” Munsch said. “At the other end of the spectrum, men who make a lot more money than their partners may be in jobs that offer more opportunities for cheating like long work hours, travel, and higher incomes that make cheating easier to conceal.”

Men were the least likely to cheat when their partners made approximately 75% of their incomes.

Putting all of these numbers in context, Munsch said that very few people cheat on their partners (or report doing so in a survey). An average of approximately 3.8% of male partners and 1.4% of female partners cheated in any given year during the six-year period studied.

The study also found that women who were financially dependent on their male partners were less likely to cheat than women who made the same as or more than their male partners. For example, women who were completely dependent on their male partner’s income were 50% less likely to cheat than women who made the same amount of money as their partner, and 75% less likely than women who contributed most or all of the household income. This relationship holds true even when taking into account age, education level, income, religious attendance, and relationship satisfaction.

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“For women, making less money than a male partner is not threatening, it is the status quo,” said Munsch. “More importantly, economically dependent women may encounter fewer opportunities to cheat, and they may make a calculated decision that cheating just isn’t worth it. If they get caught, their livelihood is at risk.”

The study uses data from the 2002 through 2007 waves of the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth.

The paper, “The Effect of Relative Income Disparity on Infidelity for Men and Women,” will be presented on Monday, Aug. 16, at 8:30 a.m. EST in the Atlanta Marriott Marquis at the American Sociological Association’s 105th Annual Meeting.

To obtain a copy of the paper; for more information on other ASA presentations; or for assistance reaching the study’s author, contact Daniel Fowler at pubinfo@asanet.org or (202) 527-7885. During the Annual Meeting (Aug. 13-17), ASA’s Public Information Office staff can be reached in the press room, located in Room 202 of the Hilton Atlanta, at (404) 572-6511 or (914) 450-4557 (cell).

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