

'Trophy wife' stereotype is largely a myth, new study shows

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Don't be so quick to judge. Most people are familiar with the "trophy wife" stereotype that attractive women marry rich men, placing little importance on their other traits, including physical appearance, and that men look for pretty wives but don't care about their education or earnings.

New research, however, by University of Notre Dame Sociologist Elizabeth McClintock, shows the trophy wife stereotype is largely a

myth fueled by selective observation that reinforces sexist stereotypes and trivializes [women's](#) careers.

In "Beauty and Status: The Illusion of Exchange in Partner Selection?" forthcoming in *American Sociological Review*, McClintock resolves the paradox between the trophy wife stereotype and the evidence that couples match on both [physical attractiveness](#) and socioeconomic status.

Using, for the first time, a nationally representative sample of young couples in which both partners were interviewed and rated for physical attractiveness, McClintock was able to control for matching on attractiveness. She says prior research in this area has ignored two important factors.

"I find that handsome men partner with pretty women and successful men partner with successful women," says McClintock, who specializes in inequality within romantic partnerships. "So, on average, high-status men do have better-looking wives, but this is because they themselves are considered better looking—perhaps because they are less likely to be overweight and more likely to afford braces, nice clothes and trips to the dermatologist, etc. Secondly, the strongest force by far in [partner selection](#) is similarity—in education, race, religion and physical attractiveness."

McClintock's research shows that there is not, in fact, a general tendency for women to trade beauty for money. That is not to say trophy wife marriages never happen, just that they are very rare.

"Donald Trump and his third wife Melania Knauss-Trump may very well exemplify the trophy wife stereotype," McClintock says. "But, there are many examples of rich men who partner with [successful women](#) rather than 'buying' a supermodel wife.

The two [men](#) who founded Google (Larry Page and Sergey Brin) both married highly accomplished women—one has a PhD and the other is a wealthy entrepreneur."

McClintock says the trophy wife stereotype is most often wrongly-applied among non- celebrities.

"I've heard doctors' wives referred to as trophy wives by observers who only notice her looks and his status and fail to realize that he is good-looking too and that she is also a successful professional—or was before she had kids and left her job," McClintock says.

McClintock's research also indicates that, contrary to the trophy wife stereotype, social class barriers in the marriage market are relatively impermeable. Beautiful women are unlikely to leverage their looks to secure upward mobility by marriage.

Provided by University of Notre Dame

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