

People more likely to cheat as they become more economically dependent on their spouses

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Credit: George Hodan/public domain

Both men and women are more likely to cheat on their spouses the more economically dependent they are on them, according to a new study.

"You would think that people would not want to 'bite the hand that feeds them' so to speak, but that is not what my research shows," said study author Christin L. Munsch, an assistant professor of sociology at the University of Connecticut. "Instead, the findings indicate people like feeling relatively equal in their relationships. People don't like to feel dependent on another person."

According to Munsch, in an average year, there is about a 5 percent chance that women who are completely economically dependent on their husbands will cheat, whereas there is about a 15 percent chance that men who are entirely economically dependent on their wives will have an affair.

Although Munsch found that economic dependency increases the likelihood of engaging in [infidelity](#) for both [men and women](#), there appears to be something that makes men who are not primary [breadwinners](#) even more prone to cheating compared to women who are not primary breadwinners.

"Extramarital sex allows men undergoing a masculinity threat—that is not being primary breadwinners, as is culturally expected—to engage in behavior culturally associated with masculinity," Munsch said. "For men, especially young men, the dominant definition of masculinity is scripted in terms of sexual virility and conquest, particularly with respect to multiple sex partners. Thus, engaging in infidelity may be a way of reestablishing threatened masculinity. Simultaneously, infidelity allows threatened men to distance themselves from, and perhaps punish, their higher earning spouses."

Titled, "Her Support, His Support: Money, Masculinity, and Marital Infidelity," the study, which appears in the June issue of the *American Sociological Review*, relies on data from the 2001 through 2011 waves of the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth and considers more than

2,750 married people who range in age from 18 to 32-years-old.

While Munsch found similarities in the way that men and women respond to being economically dependent, she discovered that men and women who are primary breadwinners in their marriages behave very differently. For women, the more they "breadwin"—that is, the larger their percentage of the combined marital income—the less likely they are to cheat.

"Women who out earn their husbands challenge the status quo," said Munsch, who noted that women are least likely to engage in infidelity when they make 100 percent of a couples' total income. "Previous research finds that women who are primary breadwinners are acutely aware of the ways in which they deviate from the cultural expectation that equates men with breadwinning. Consequently, previous research finds these women suffer from increased anxiety and insomnia and engage in what sociologists call 'deviance neutralization behaviors.'"

For example, she said [women](#) who are the primary breadwinners in their marriages often minimize their achievements, defer to their spouses, and increase their housework. "This emotional and physical work is designed to decrease interpersonal conflict and shore up their husbands' [masculinity](#)," Munsch said. "It is also aimed at keeping potentially strained relationships intact."

Among men, those who are completely economically dependent on their spouses are the most likely to cheat. As the money men make relative to their spouses increases, their odds of committing adultery decrease until their total contribution to the pooled income reaches 70 percent. Men are least likely to cheat when they bring home 70 percent of a couples' total income. After 70 percent, however, men become increasingly more likely to stray.

"These men are aware that their wives are truly dependent and may think that, as a result, their wives will not leave them even if they cheat," Munsch said. "They also might be cheating in search of a partner who will contribute more economically to the relationship. A husband who earns significantly more than his wife and has an affair—think celebrities, athletes, and politicians—is the type of infidelity that regularly makes front-page news, so I wasn't surprised to find that men who make a lot more than their wives are more likely to cheat than men in equal-earning relationships or relationships where they make a little bit more than their wives.

"What is surprising, though, is that this increase in the likelihood of men engaging in infidelity that occurs as they make significantly more than their wives is relatively small compared to the increase in the likelihood of cheating that takes place among men as they become more economically dependent. But, the affairs of economically dependent [men](#) simply don't garner media attention, so we hear about this kind of infidelity far less often."

Provided by American Sociological Association

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