

April 15, 2008

The hitch to marrying a rich woman

Men are happy to be with a woman who earns more than they do, a recent survey claims. But our writer, after his own research, doubts that



Mark Jones

A recent survey called Money, Sex and Love for MSNBC and Elle magazine talked to nearly 74,000 men and women. A mere 12 per cent of men surveyed said that they'd mind if their wife earned more than they do - "and in general," the report concluded, "men seemed happy to share the breadwinner role".

Stephanie Coontz, director of research and public education for the Council on Contemporary Families - one of the world's more fearsome job titles - called it "a real seachange that's going on in gender roles". The women's blog site Jezebel put it more succinctly: Dudes Don't Mind if a Lady Brings Home the Bacon. Above the piece was a picture of Julia Roberts and Daniel Moder, her cameraman husband, both smiling.

Every now and then we get an insight into relationships between men and women that suggests we have grown up and moved a step farther away from the ancestral cave. Forget those old clichés about men feeling emasculated and powerless in the same household as a richer woman. Guys can cope perfectly well in the less well-remunerated role as father, partner and supporter. Let's call it the Julia and Dan syndrome.

This is perhaps just as well. It's reported that the earnings of women in their twenties are already beginning to overtake men's in several large cities across America. As the glass ceilings that once held women executives back crack across the world's corporations, so, for men, the challenge of dealing with a significantly more wedged-up significant other grows. Get used to it, guys. The survey suggests that we already have.

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Now, I'm not asserting that you can't trust what men say to market researchers. It's a dull day in the office, the MD has just turned down your pay rise, the mortgage company wants another pint of blood - you probably would consent

to marrying a multimillionaire if an online survey put the question to you in your lunch break. But just to be sure, I thought I'd check out what the other party in this happy theoretical partnership makes of the prospect. So multimillionaires: can men who have less dough than you hack it?

I got in touch with Seventy Thirty, a matchmaking service for single multimillionaires. The name refers to the typical work-life balance of a successful person. The agency also deals with men; but if it's like other dating agencies, 70-30 could also refer to the ratio of women to men on its books. Eligible chaps, if not quite as rare as the aftermath of the First World War, are thinner on the ground.

Seventy Thirty is not like other agencies in one respect: you need assets of at least £1 million to join. Once the accountants have checked you out - digging for gold-diggers, presumably - they send a crack psychologist to see how your emotional capital is bearing up under the dual strains of fabulous wealth and reluctant singledom.

Rachel MacLynn (MSc, BSc Hons, it says on her e-mails) is one of those psychologists and head of membership at Seventy Thirty. Beyond a few chauffeurs and barmen at luxury hotels, few people have more rich hearts poured out to them.

"On a practical level, these women can look after themselves," MacLynn says. "It's not about the man picking up the bill; it's emotional support they want - they want someone to scoop them up and give them a hug."

You can almost hear the hard-pressed manhood of Britain crying out: I can do that - I can scoop! But having scooped, they may then need to cope with some deep psychological and social currents and a serious challenge to their self-worth.

In MacLynn's experience, the other Julia Roberts scenario, the fictional one in Notting Hill where a megastar and a small bookshop owner Hugh Grant live happily ever after, is just that: a fiction.

"Men say again and again in these surveys 'I wouldn't mind', 'it's not a big deal'. But they do have a problem. If she's less wealthy he can't feel he's the provider. So where does he fit in?"

I interviewed some women on Seventy Thirty's books: all were in their late forties, open, genuine, extremely successful - and, I realised, willing to give up any number of Caribbean homes and yacht charters for the sake of a happy family life.

Sonja (I've changed her name) is a leading figure in the investment community in Australia and London. When she and her first husband were making their way in the corporate world, building a family, buying houses, all was hunky-dory. As soon as she landed The Big Job, things went awry and the game-playing started. When the husband put her favourite holiday home on the market without her knowledge, the games were up.

Call this one the Martin Melcher syndrome. Melcher was married to Doris Day and, like many a husband of a rich and famous wife, appointed himself her business manager. By Hollywood standards it was a happy and rock-like partnership. Then Melcher died suddenly and Doris discovered that he had lost the millions she had earned and committed her to a TV show that she knew nothing about. She was left broke.

It's easy to characterise Melcher as the archetypal sponge and chancer. The more intriguing picture is of a man intimidated by his wife's success trying, in MacLynn's phrase, to fit in. Like the French trader who lost billions with evermore desperate market speculations, perhaps he did it for the love of "the firm". It's also true that atavistic ideas about who should reach for the bill when it appears on the saucer in the Michelin-star restaurant you chose for your first date are as strong as ever. Even in the Money, Sex and Love survey, the change is not as rich and strange as it may seem. Three men in four feel guilty if they don't pay on the first date; and 40 per cent of women are bothered if men accept their money.

Susie Ambrose, the founder of Seventy Thirty, believes that men remain "more connected to success and more competitive" in a partnership. Sonja talks about her family and partners as a team taking on the world - and, if necessary, leaving the world behind: she was happy to quit running her international investment firm for the sake of a consultancy and more time with her new partner and family. He was happy too, while enjoying success in another arena - an expensively maintained mistress in the US.

If you can't hope to match your wife's incredible wealth and/or fame, the next best thing is to carve out your own niche and reputation and be secure in that. If Guy Ritchie had managed a decent hit movie in recent years, perhaps there would have been rather fewer column inches spewed out when he failed to appear by his wife's side when she was inducted into rock music's Hall of Fame. Madonna's publicist has now been obliged to issue a statement saying that the couple remain happily married, something that sounded ominously like the football chairman's vote of confidence in his manager.

"Women want their man to be more successful," MacLynn says. "Wealth is an indicator of success, but women will place more emphasis on finding a partner who is academically brilliant or creative. We are not matchmaking wealth and wealth."

Which is good news. You can be headhunted by Seventy Thirty even if you don't have the requisite millions tucked away in the bank (or, alternatively, somewhere safe). One of its happier stories is a wealthy Home Counties lady who was introduced to a gardener that Susie Ambrose happened to know. As long as you are a good gardener - or plumber, or painter, expert in medieval Latin philosophy, or even, just conceivably, a bookshop owner - you have a chance. Best of all, be a Scottish anaesthetist. There may not be hundreds of Scottish anaesthetists who are doted upon by the squillionaire classes. It just took one, Dr Neil Murray, to shoot them to the top of the earnings league table. Mr and Mrs J.K. Rowling don't like speculation about their private lives from people who don't know them, but perhaps they won't mind us saying that they seem to cope splendidly with the £550 million or so that separates their income brackets.

The conventional matchmaking agencies have a fight on their hands. Expect the www.scottishsocietyofanaesthetists.co.uk to become the hot dating site of choice.