

Income Inequality in Romantic Relationships: A Multi-Dimensional Resource Perspective

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Purpose/Motivation: Advances in gender equality across education and labor markets, coupled with rising economic uncertainty, have contributed to the growing prevalence of female breadwinner couples (Drago et al. 2005; Gihleb et al. 2024; Glass et al. 2021; Kowalewska & Vitali 2024). However, prior research frequently links such non-traditional income arrangements to negative life and relationship outcomes (e.g., Blom & Hewitt, 2020; Hajdu & Hajdu, 2018; Pierce et al., 2013; Syrda, 2020). These findings are frequently explained through social comparison processes influenced by persistent male breadwinner norms (Gash & Plagnol, 2021; Pierce et al., 2013; Syrda, 2020). Yet, these norms not only shape expectations about who should earn more but reflect broader assumptions about appropriate configurations of social status within couples. From this perspective, male breadwinning signals male dominance in income-related status (Vink et al. 2023), rendering female breadwinner couples norm-violating. However, while income is a central status dimension, educational attainment or occupational prestige also serve as signals of status (Chudnovskaya & Kashyap, 2020; Gong, 2007; Hornung & McCullough, 1981; Vink et al., 2023a, 2023b; Vink et al., 2022). From this multidimensional perspective, three central implications follow: (1) individuals may hold unequal standing across status dimensions (Zhang 2008; Chudnovskaya & Kashyap 2020), (2) female breadwinner couples may differ in the configuration of non-income status dimensions (Zhang 2008), and (3) this configuration may shape female breadwinning's effect on partners. Nonetheless, existing research largely treats income as a unidimensional indicator of status and overlooks that partners may simultaneously hold advantages and disadvantages in other status-relevant domains. This thesis addresses this gap by adopting a multidimensional perspective and investigates whether men's relative advantages in education and occupational prestige can buffer previously reported negative effects of female breadwinning share on relationship satisfaction.

Theories/Hypotheses: The study draws on Social Comparison Theory (Festinger, 1954), the Self-Evaluation Maintenance Model (Tesser, 1988), and research on male breadwinner and female homemaker norms. Income differences within couples are conceptualized as salient

comparison situations whose impact on relationship satisfaction depends on the self-relevance of the income domain as shaped by traditional gender norms (Pierce et al., 2013). Gender ideology is further theorized to impact the link between female breadwinning shares and relationship satisfaction by heightening the importance placed on such norms. Occupational prestige and educational attainment are theorized as compensatory forces in the social comparison process (J. V. Wood et al., 1999). Four hypotheses follow:

H1: Increases in female breadwinning share are negatively associated with both partners' relationship satisfaction.

H2: Traditional gender ideology strengthens the negative association between increases in female breadwinning share and relationship satisfaction.

H3: Men's educational advantage attenuates the negative association between increases in female breadwinning share and relationship satisfaction.

H4: Men's occupational prestige advantage attenuates the negative association between increases in female breadwinning share and relationship satisfaction.

Approach/Methodology: The analysis draws on longitudinal data from the German Family Panel (pairfam; Brüderl et al. 2024), covering approximately 3,400 heterosexual couples observed over seven panel waves. Multilevel models are used to disentangle within-individual from between-individual effects of couple income dynamics on relationship satisfaction. The models further examine moderation by gender ideology, male educational advantage, and male occupational prestige advantage. A set of post hoc and supplemental analyses, including mediation models via self-esteem, provide additional insight into the findings.

Findings: Contrary to expectations, women report higher relationship satisfaction as their breadwinning share increases, while men's satisfaction remains unaffected. No moderating effects emerge for gender ideology, male educational advantage, or male occupational prestige advantage. Supplemental analyses support these findings and indicate that the anticipated negative comparison effects as well as compensation mechanisms do not materialize in the longitudinal data.

Research Limitations: First, the analyses do not explicitly account for the reasons underlying changes in joint income. This poses a limitation, as shifts in income constellations may reflect deliberate choices (e.g., men reducing hours to support the career of women), which could alter how such changes affect relationship satisfaction. Second, I only considered individuals' net income to determine who functions as the primary financial provider. However, individuals also have other sources of economic resources (e.g., wealth), which might impact

perceptions of who acts as the “true” breadwinner (Tisch, 2021), potentially affecting comparison processes. Third, despite their potential to reduce between-person bias, within-person estimates do not inherently confer greater causal interpretability (Lees et al. 2024).

Research Implications: The findings challenge dominant assumptions about the relational costs of female breadwinning and suggest that previously reported negative effects may be overstated or context dependent. By demonstrating the importance of longitudinal designs, the study highlights that cross-sectional associations may conflate stable between-couple differences with within-couple change. More broadly, the results call for a reconsideration of how income inequality, norms, and status are conceptualized in research on romantic couples.

Practical Implications: Concerns that female breadwinning inherently undermines relationship quality appear unwarranted, particularly in the study contexts. Instead, the findings suggest that increasing women’s economic contributions may coexist with stable, or even improved, relationship satisfaction, especially for women. Hence, career counsellors, policymakers, and organizations could benefit from reframing women’s career advancement as compatible with fulfilling partnerships. This could be reinforced through policies that enable men to assume greater domestic responsibilities, thereby supporting role distributions tailored to couples’ preferences, enhancing women’s professional development, and challenging narratives that restrict the utilization of talent within organizations.

Contribution: This thesis contributes to the literature on romantic relationships and their status dynamics by introducing a multidimensional resource perspective and providing longitudinal evidence that questions prevailing narratives about female breadwinning. It extends social comparison approaches by empirically testing compensatory mechanisms across multiple status dimensions and demonstrates their limited explanatory power in this context.

Paper type: Empirical

Further readings:

Byrne, A., & Barling, J. (2017). When she brings home the job status: Wives’ job status, status leakage, and marital instability. *Organization Science*, 28(2), 177–192.

Chudnovskaya, M., & Kashyap, R. (2020). Is the end of educational hypergamy the end of status hypergamy? Evidence from Sweden. *European Sociological Review*, 36(3), 351–365.

Gihleb, R., Giuntella, O., & Stella, L. (2024). Relative income within the household, gender norms, and well-being. *PloS One*, 19(10), e0306180.