

**HIS AND HER MARRIAGE TODAY:  
WIVES' INCOME AND HUSBANDS' LATER MID-LIFE HEALTH\***

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**ABSTRACT**

This study presents the development and empirical assessment of three models examining how wives' income impacts husbands' health – the *gender-neutral model*, the *starving hearts model*, and the *gender relations model*. Each model reflects a theoretically-grounded hypothesis about gendered marital relations that can be empirically tested through operationalizations of the relationship between wives' individual or relative income contributions and husbands' health. The gender-neutral model presumes no gendered significance of marital income thereby suggesting that all marital income improves husbands' health regardless of the earner. The starving hearts model assesses whether being the primary breadwinner is physically taxing for husbands due to the financial burden of supporting a family *and* the social burden of maintaining the status of male breadwinner. The gender relations model tests whether wives' income contributions harm husbands' health due to the juxtaposition of the male breadwinner ideology and reality of the dual-earning marriage.

Drawing from research on spousal health effects, gendered division of household labor, and relative income in marriage, I use husbands' health as a key measure of well-being and as a heuristic to understand the persistence of gendered marital norms. I employ several measures of relative

income including a linear measure of income dependency, a dichotomous measure of earning less than half of the marital income, and a measure of earning more than 90% of the marital income. These different operationalizations allow me to further examine the meaning of relative income for husbands' health.

I conduct ordered logistic regression and bivariate probit analyses to analyze longitudinal spousal data on 1,795 non-retired couples from the 1992-1994 Health and Retirement Study. I control for each spouse's age, sex, education, race, occupational characteristics, and an array of baseline health measures to rule out potential confounds and to establish the causal ordering of wives' income and husbands' health. The results conclusively refute both the gender-neutral and the starving hearts models, but robustly support the gender relations model. Indeed, being economically dependent was worse for husbands' health than current smoking – a well-established health risk behavior. Specifically, earning less than half of the marital income was associated with a 30 percent reduction in the odds of husbands being in better self-reported health compared to a 20 percent reduction caused by current smoking. The findings point to gendered expectations of primary breadwinning as an important determinant of men's health.