

BY ERIN HENRY

Marriage Is Extra Work

Adam Blandin, John Bailey Jones, and Fang Yang. “Marriage and Work among Prime-Age Men.” Federal Reserve Bank of Richmond Working Paper No. 23-02, January 2023.

An immense literature in economics is devoted to studying the labor supply of women and determining whether their supply differs by marital status or the presence of children. This literature has found, not surprisingly, that married women tend to have a lower supply of labor compared to women who have never been married. But there has been substantially less research on the relationship of marital status and labor supply for men. It turns out there is also a gap in annual hours worked between married men and men who have never been married, with married men working substantially more. Possible explanations and implications of this pattern are the subject of a recent working paper by Richmond Fed economist John Bailey Jones, alongside Adam Blandin from Vanderbilt University and Dallas Fed economist Fang Yang.

To deduce possible explanations for the gap, Blandin, Jones, and Yang first compared annual hours worked by the two groups to discover when it appears. They sought to answer whether men decide to spend more hours working after becoming married, or whether these men are already working more hours before they get married. Using data from the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth 1979 (NLSY79), the authors found that in the period starting 10 years before marriage and ending 10 years after, wages and hours worked increased 10 percent and 13 percent, respectively.

The authors studied whether these findings could be explained by the presence of children rather than the onset of marriage, which are highly correlated.

To split out these effects, they separately evaluated men whose first child appeared before their first marriage against those whose first child appeared after their first marriage; they found that hours worked by both groups increased prior to their first marriage. Overall, the data revealed that the differences in labor market outcomes by marital status

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are primarily driven by a surprising source: an increase in hours worked in the five years prior to marriage.

The authors considered two possible explanations for this increase in hours worked prior to marriage: events that increase both hours of work and likelihood of marriage, and a marriage-driven increase in work both after men marry and in anticipation of marriage. To investigate these hypotheses, the authors created a structural life-cycle model that seeks to reproduce men’s marriage and labor supply decisions. The model features uncertainty over wages, family dynamics, income and taxes, and other factors affecting a man’s labor supply. The authors adjusted their model in line with the NLSY79 data to accurately replicate the

marriage and labor market dynamics found in the data.

Through this model, Blandin, Jones, and Yang explored why married men work more. They first evaluated the role of selection into marriage, where men with higher wages and more working hours are more likely to marry. While they found that men with higher wages progressed in their relationships at a quicker pace, they determined that selection alone was not enough to explain the increase in wages around the time of marriage.

The authors next considered the role of marriage and family structure and explored three possible effects on the labor supply of men. First, the presence of additional household members, such as spouses or children, limits the portion of total household consumption consumed by the husband/father. Second, altruism toward spouses and children implies that the husband receives utility from the consumption of other household members in addition to his own consumption. Finally, family members contribute positive or negative wealth effects, such as additional spousal earnings or child care costs. The authors referred to the sum of these three effects as the “mouths-to-feed” effect. They found this combined effect to be the primary driver in affecting the male labor supply, with the altruistic preferences of husbands being the most important factor.

The authors noted that their work provides insights into additional avenues of research on marriage rates, family structure, and male labor supply. Such research, they suggested, could shed light on the “potentially complex interactions between household formation and labor market outcomes” as well as policy reforms that affect these interactions, such as legislation surrounding divorce and child support or tax and transfer programs. **EF**