Income Attraction: 
An Online Dating Field Experiment

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ABSTRACT

Marriage rates have been decreasing in the West contemporaneously as women’s relative wages have been increasing. We found the opposite pattern in China. Prior empirical studies with US marriage data indicate that women marry up (and men marry down) economically. Furthermore, if the wife earns more, less happiness and greater strife are reported, the gender gap in housework increases, and they are more likely to divorce. However, these observational studies cannot identify whether these consequences were due to men’s preference for lower income women, or women’s preference for higher income men, or to other factors. We complement this literature by measuring income based attraction in a field experiment. We randomly assigned income levels to 360 unique artificial profiles on a major online dating website and recorded the incomes of nearly 4000 visits. We found that men of all income levels visited women’s profiles with different income levels at roughly equal rates. In contrast, women at all income levels visited men with higher income at higher rates, and surprisingly, these higher rates increased with the women’s own income. Men with the highest level of income got ten times more visits than the lowest. We discuss how the gender difference in “income attraction” might shed light on the wage premium for married men, and men in general, and why the gender gap in housework is higher for women who earn more than their husbands. To our knowledge, this is the first field experimental study of gender differences in preferences for mate income.