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Male Hypergamy and Social Status

Cover Page Footnote

Thank you to Anne Salter and Laura Masce for encouraging me to submit an article. It is my hope that more students will do the same

In order for social mobility to work effectively, one must inevitably choose certain behaviors; examples include obtaining a high-income career (or starting a business), becoming a part of a Greek collegiate or professional organization such as a fraternity or sorority, and ultimately marrying above or within one's social class. If a person in a lower class completes these and many other subtle actions properly, they will be accepted into the higher class structure. If performed incorrectly or for false gains, the social class distinction will be disregarded and one will only have the economic acceptance. Since the beginning of civilized society, many men have married advantageously into a higher class in order to gain or solidify social status. From Giovanni di Bicci de' Medici to Robert L. Johnson of BET, men throughout history have chosen to marry women they not only loved, but also respected, recognizing her intellect and capability. They then turned this new familial alliance into opportunities to grow from lower-middle to upper class.

Hypergamy, "that obligatory act of all families destined to distinguish themselves" is one of the clearest statements on male hypergamy as a social pattern.¹ There are subtle distinctions, though. For example, while women who "marry up" are able to gain some status, men who "marry down" lose some prestige. Stephen Birmingham, a class sociologist and biographer perhaps summed it up best: "An aristocratic wife can make an aristocrat of her husband, but it does not work the other way around"² Entry into the higher social classes then, is not something that is equally obtained through marriage. A man has to marry into and then prove himself to the upper class. However, if he marries out of social class into a lower class, he is considered to share the same social class as his wife rather than lifting his wife up into the upper class.

¹Vidal, Gore. "The Four Generations Of The Adams Family." *United States: Essays : 1952-1992*. 1st ed. New York: Random House, 1993. 645. Print.

² Birmingham, Stephen. *America's Secret Aristocracy*. Boston: Little, Brown, 1987. 48. Print.

Therefore, hypergamy as a social stratifier is a combination of the wife's social status and personal efforts to conform to the mores of the higher social class.

While there are notable exceptions, particularly Rodrigo Borgia or John Jacob Astor, even the latter admits the principle that a brilliant wife with good business acumen makes up for any lack of dowry payments.³ This essay is written in observation of the choice of hypergamous marriage and the social status it confers upon a male. Specifically, the essay intends to reveal that in order for men to genuinely enter into a higher social class if they are lower to middle class, they must strategically marry into a higher social class.

The act of hypergamy among males is not covered as a social topic often; however, it is covered in books that talk about social classes from a historical context. Male hypergamy is a simple matter of social mobility which allows a man to have an easier go of making a fortune and leaving a financial, emotional, and spiritual inheritance for his children. This is a powerful motivating force for men connected to ambition, empathy towards others, and a desire to pass on a legacy of remembrance and greatness for the annals of history.

In Christopher Hibbert's work, *The House of Medici: Its Rise and Fall*, he writes of the marriage of the wealthy Piccarda Bueri to Giovanni de' Medici.⁴ A good marriage full of love and many children, in Renaissance Florence, was considered a requirement, as well as a history

³ Wilson, James Grant, and John Fiske. "John Jacob Astor." *Appletons' Cyclopaedia of American Biography*,. Vol.1. New York: D. Appleton, 1887. 112. Print.

⁴ Hibbert, Christopher. "The Rise of The Medici." *The House of Medici: Its Rise and Fall*. New York: Morrow, 1975. 32. Print.

of family political service for a person to rise in social class.⁵ Giovanni de' Medici married into the socially prestigious Bueri family to regain his social esteem after his father's death left the family poor. With his financial expertise and prestigious marriage, de' Medici positioned himself to receive opportunities to be one of the pre-eminent bankers in Florence. This positioning eventually leads to his son Cosimo, and grandson Piero, becoming the papal bankers for Pope John XXIII.⁶³ The impact of de' Medici's marriage and subsequent dynastic rule over Florence is evident in the amount of art, busts, statues, and other cultural artifacts that are part of Florentine history.

Another quality that Giovanni de' Medici possesses which is also found in later examples such as John D. Rockefeller Sr., is a mixture of personal piety or "prudence" and public liberality in artistic and community contributions. In fact, much of the two family founders' lives can be paralleled.

Rockefeller, like de' Medici, also came from a poor background. He married well and showed great financial prowess in bookkeeping, a necessity that the Medici family refined into an art. Finally, John D. Rockefeller, Sr. became a man who insisted on keeping his own personal privacy despite being the wealthiest man of his time.⁷

Family life played a large role for Rockefeller in his selection of a wife. John D. Rockefeller, Sr.'s marriage was to Laura Celestia Spelman, the daughter of a prominent dry-

⁵ Ibid., 21

⁶ Young, G. F. *The Medici*. 2nd ed. Vol. 1. New York: E.P. Dutton, 1911. 30. Print.

⁷ Chernow, Ron. "Seat of Empire." *Titan: The Life of John D. Rockefeller, Sr.* New York: Random House, 1998. 217. Print.

goods store owner. Ron Chernow, a biographer of various famous figures, describes John's attraction to Laura as such: "It's easy to see what drew John to Laura aside from patent compatibility, for the Spelmans signified the respectability that had so frustratingly eluded his own family."⁸ Driven to impress and fueled by the love and respectability of her family, Rockefeller convinced Mr. Spelman to allow the marriage. After some moderate success in business and having four daughters, John Rockefeller, Sr. was convinced to try his hand in refining oil. He formed one of the world's largest corporations Standard Oil and carried out his plans until he had nearly a ninety percent monopoly on oil.⁹ The effect of this is evident in that the successor companies to Standard Oil, particularly ExxonMobil, still have the largest financial returns and reports of all Big Oil companies today.

Despite his public image, Rockefeller was a pious parent in contrast to his own father, who had very high standards for his children.¹⁰ He lived modestly in spite of his wealth, and besides his one mansion Kykuit, was not particularly known for spending lavishly on his own behalf. Rockefeller instead donated to his church, following the Baptist tradition of tithes and offerings, as well as donating to several charities, public institutions, and universities, before founding his own charitable foundation which became one of the pillars of American philanthropy during the Gilded Age.¹¹ Rockefeller's contributions to American society are well-known today but it is clear that he utilized the social and professional network provided by his hypergamous marriage to Laura Spelman.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 89

⁹ *Ibid.*, 537

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 187

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 563

Political figures or social outcasts are also not immune from marrying into a higher social class. John Adams, the second President of the United States was said to have married into a prestigious family which connected him to all of the families of Massachusetts.¹² Further, Mayer Amschel Rothschild, founder of the Rothschild clans, utilized his marriage to Gutel Schnapper to gain entrée into the familial world of Jewish finance.¹³ Transforming his coin-collecting business into a full investment bank, he became one of the most prestigious bankers of his day, a tradition continued by each of his five sons and their descendants who own Rothschild businesses. The two men rose above their initial station in life by hard work and “marrying up.” The respective legacies of each man offered political contributions to their nations and diplomacy across the world.

Male hypergamy is also not linked to a specific ethnicity or white male supremacy ideology. As previously shown, Italians, Jews, and proto-WASPs of German descent have shown a propensity towards using marriage as a solidifier of social status. However, two prime examples of African-American men, John H. Johnson, founder of the Johnson Publishing Company and Robert L. Johnson, founder of BET, also utilized the principle of male hypergamy to launch ambitious careers which led them to become, respectively of their eras, the wealthiest black men in the world.

John H. Johnson was a very poor child from Arkansas. Living primarily with his mother, they moved to Chicago before John became a high school student. In Chicago, he met and

¹² Bellow, Adam. "John Adams: Republican Dynast." *In Praise of Nepotism: A Natural History*. New York: Doubleday, 2003. 294. Print.

¹³ Bellow, Adam. "Rothschild: The Ultimate Family Business." *In Praise of Nepotism: A Natural History*. New York: Doubleday, 2003. 226. Print.

married Eunice Walker, who was a descendant of one of the most prominent African-American families in the South.¹⁴ Stephen Birmingham, who has also written about the African-American upper class expressed the motivation behind the marriage as follows: “An ambitious black man, eager to rid himself of the shackles of poverty, often considers it both a business and social asset to marry...”¹⁵ Though his statement is given solely about African-American men, he has shown in his other works that male hypergamy is an asset that applies across the board in America. African-American males are driven by the same passions as any other male, and finding the institution of marriage to be a way of changing economic circumstances, escape from poverty and social irrelevance by leaving a legacy.

John H. Johnson, regardless of whether or not he consciously decided to marry Eunice based on this information, utilized the principle of male hypergamy so expertly that his business dealings with *Ebony*, *Jet*, and *Negro Digest* made him one of the wealthiest African-Americans in the world by his death, with a net worth of over \$100 million.

Robert L. Johnson, founder of the Black Entertainment Television network, or BET, was also hypergamous, a trait he had in common with John H Johnson. He married well into the family of Sheila Crump.¹⁶ Described as a partnership, his marriage to Sheila “introduced him to a whole new class of highly successful and affluent black professionals” that made him consider enlarging his ambitions.¹⁷ Robert, though he created the wildly successful BET, sold it to Viacom, and became the first African-American billionaire in net worth; was not as successful in his marriage, having cheated on his wife and losing his billions in a divorce battle.

¹⁴ Johnson, John H., and Lerone Bennett. *Succeeding against the Odds*. New York, NY: Warner, 1989. 104. Print.

¹⁵ Birmingham, Stephen. *Certain People: America's Black Elite*. Boston: Little, Brown, 1977. 36. Print.

¹⁶ Pulley, Brett. *The Billion Dollar BET: Robert Johnson and the inside Story of Black Entertainment Television*. Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley, 2004. 22. Print.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 22

An advantageous marriage based on male hypergamy, depends upon a smart, industrious, and willing wife from a good family and a healthy dose of personal ambition. This comes after distinguishing his own ambition to the lady or her parents as a proof of personal ability to be a respectably working man in his own right. There are different markers for one group of people over another, but historically, men have married for social and business reasons as well as love. The examples provided are meant to simply reveal a pattern throughout history and suggest that male hypergamy is one of the clearest ways for men to move up the social class ladder.

Male hypergamy is one of the signals a man can send about his social status. His social and economic stock increases exponentially with an advantageous marriage based on love, respect, and capability to a wife of a prosperous family. When done properly, hypergamy creates fortunes, institutions, and cultural significance; if done incorrectly, it leads to resentment, a reputation as a social climber and ultimately, a loss of fortunes.

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