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Gender Differences in Intelligent Marriage Decisions

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Abstract. This paper explores the complex relationship between intelligence and gender differences in marriage decisions. Despite widespread declines in marriage rates, studies indicate contrasting marriage outcomes for men and women correlated with increased cognitive ability. In particular, men are more inclined to marry when they are more intelligent, yet women are much less likely to marry. This review investigates why similar cognitive traits result in different marital paths using interdisciplinary lenses from evolutionary psychology, sociology, economics, and motivational theory. While socioeconomic analyses emphasize changing cultural norms, particularly greater educational attainment and professional opportunities for women, evolutionary explanations emphasize gender-specific mate preferences that emphasize resource acquisition and social status. According to motivational theories, particularly Maslow's hierarchy of needs, women with higher IQs place a higher value on self-actualization than on traditional marital roles that are limited by expectations around the house. Furthermore, marriage decisions are further influenced by modern trends such as premarital cohabitation, especially for high-achieving women. These viewpoints are integrated in this review to create a coherent framework that examines gender differences in intelligence-related marriage patterns, providing insightful information for future research.

Keywords: gender roles, marriage, selection preferences, societal norms

1. Introduction

Family life has transformed as a result of the decades-long decline in marriage percentages. However, the retreat from marriage is not consistent, but rather interacts with personal characteristics, including cognitive ability, in unexpected ways. According to a study by four British universities, for each 15-point increase in 1Q, the likelihood of getting married increases by 35% for a man but decreases by 58% for a woman. The pattern is supported by extensive register data from Finland, which shows that, even when income and social standing are held constant, men with higher IQs are more likely to get married and maintain their married status. According to complementary sociological reviews, women with higher levels of education, a proxy closely associated with IQ, tend to completely avoid marriage. These finds pose a central question: why should the same cognitive asset translate into opposite marital trajectories for men and women? Explanations have been proposed in evolutionary psychology, social peychology, and economics, but the evidence remains scattered across disciplines. In attempt to bridge this gap, the review

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creates a cohesive conceptual framework that explains how intelligence interacts with gendered expectations, socioeconomic pathways, and life-course motivations to influence marriage decisions in the modern era by charting points of agreement and disagreement.

2. Literature review

This literature review examines how education and class shape social inequality, particularly through marriage and life outcomes.Education boosts intelligence, while class shapes marriage outcomes, where are both key factors in my study on social inequality. [1] examines the decline in arranged marriage in India from 1970 to 2012. The authors evaluare period trends of spouse choice, the length of acquittance prior to marriage, intercaste marriage, and consanguineous marriage at the national level, as well as by region, urban residence, and religion. During this time, intercaste marriage increased, consanguineous marriage declined, spouses meeting on their wedding day decreased, and women were more active in selecting their own husbands. However, a significant majority of recent marriages still exhibit the characteristics of an arranged marriage, and many of these changes were minor in scope. Furthermore, young women increasingly collaborated with parents to select husbands rather than dislodging them. These trends indicate a integration of traditional Western and Indian marriage customs rather than a unilateral shift towards Western marriage practices, as proposed by theories of family change and observed in other Asian contexts. Similarly, another factor of this study's examination can be applied to class distinctions [2]. Roxburgh further complicates marriage outcomes by intersecting race, class, and gender as he combines intersectionality theory with the "fundamental cause" viewpoint. The article examines data from 23,234 adults who participated in the 2003 U.S. National Health Interview Survey to regress self-rated physical health and depressive symptoms (measured on a K–6) on marital status, interacting with household income, education, gender, race (non-Hispanic Black vs. White), and race. The findings reveal heterogeneity: among White people, marriage only predicts lower depression and marginally better physical health in low-income strata, with the effects being strongest for women; at higher incomes, the advantage of marriage vanishes. For African Americans, the trends are reversed: married Black men and wealthy Black women experience higher levels of depression than their single counterparts, and applying socioeconomic controls has no positive effect on physical health. For married Black women, income gradients are inversely correlated with mental health, while they are consistently positive for physical health. Roxburgh thus challenges universalistic claims about "marriage protection," demonstrating how racialized gender regimes and socioeconomic resources influence whether marriage serves as a stressor or a buffer, and urging academics to consider roles and health within intersecting structures of inequality.

[3] establishes education as a primary factor of enhancing intelligence, as demonstrated from test scores, and educational duration. Through this evaluation, two results are revealed: students who are more intelligent are more educated, or a longer education increases the extent of intelligence. Ritchie and Tucker-Drob's meta-analysis combines 142 effect sizes from 42 data sets (>600,000 participants) from three quasi-experimental approaches: regression-discontinuity designs around school-entry cutoffs, compulsory-schooling policy reforms, and longitudinal studies controlling earlier IQ. They find that the benefits of extra schooling persist from youth into late life, that extend fluid, crystallized, and composite skills, and surviving moderator controls (age at outcome, test domain, achievement vs. other) and four publication-bias diagnostics (publication status, funnel asymmetry, p-curve, PET-PEESE). Although the authors consider education to be "the most consistent, robust, and durable method yet identified for raising intelligence," they also note that there are still unanswered questions regarding diminishing returns, individual-difference moderators,

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mechanism (curriculum content, thinking styles, self-regulation), and downstream socioeconomic impacts that need to be explored in future causal work. Heterogeneity is partially explained by younger outcome age and achievement-style tests showing larger gains.

[4] re-evaluates Maslow's hierarchy, noting its needs (physiological to self-actualization) predict well-being globally but prioritize variably by context. While conceptual critiques emphasized circular definitions and Western individualist bias, early empirical tests found only partial, inconsistent support for a strict step-wise progression. The content of Maslovian needs predicts well-being globally, according to large cross-cultural datasets like Tay & Diener's Gallup World Poll analysis. However, the order in which people pursue these needs varies greatly depending on the context; belonging or esteem frequently gain importance even when safety or basic resources fall behind. The hierarchy is therefore viewed as flexible by modern theorists; [5] reframed it as an evolutionarily informed "stack" whose layers can overlap, change priorities, and broaden to encompass parenting and mate-seeking motivations. In modern days, the model remains essential in sectors of society, yet the consenus lies in it flexibility that depicts universal motivational domains.

[6] advance gender-construction scholarship by demonstating that everyday "work-family" choices are a crucible in which marital gender hierarchies are forged. The authors trace how spouses frame alternatives, gather information, and justify outcomes using two waves of qualitative data from 61 mostly middle-class U.S. couples: open-ended phone interviews conducted 18 months after a significant work-family decision, and questionnaires mailed six months after the decision. Wives' decisions focused on rearranging their paid hours around childcare and were characterized by ambivalence, misunderstandings, and frequent deference to husbands. Wives' decisions about their husbands' employment usually involved job changes without changing hours, were discussed collaboratively, and almost always resulted in the husband's preferred outcome. Despite the fact that couples referred to their process as "joint" and "consensual," textual analysis reveals Komter's concept of "apparent consensus": women's compliance is interpreted as love, concealing underlying male privilege. By showing how seemingly neutral decision-making practices replicate the breadwinner–homemaker model and urging researchers to look into hidden power when assessing marital cooperation, the study thus casts doubt on assertions of growing egalitarianism.

[7] revisits Goode's diffusion thesis by testing whether classic social determinants of divorce (education, parental socioeconomic status (SES), religion, parental divorce, and presence of children) have shifted across four Dutch marriage cohorts (1942-64 to 1990-99). The article examines remarkable stability for the majority of factors using discrete-time event-history models on 6,164 marriages and 1,356 divorces from the 2003 Netherlands Kinship Panel Study. Parental SES continues to be a positive predictor of divorce, while having children, religiosity, and parental divorce all maintain their expected protective or risk effects without any cohort interaction. By the 1980s and 1990s, lower education predicted higher dissolution, supporting Goode's hypothesised reversal as divorce spread down the social hierarchy. The only exception to this rule was education: in the initial cohort, couples with higher levels of education divorced more frequently. This educational penalty focuses on the first few years of marriage, according to duration interactions. The authors contend that cultural liberalism among highly educated people is now outweighed by economic hardship and diminished relational skills among the less educated, making divorce a more class-based phenomenon and exacerbating disparities for children from lower-status households.

3. Methodology

This study adopts an integrative literature-review methodology, using secondary research that systematically collects, evaluates, and synthesizes prior empirical and theoretical work to generate

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new perspectives on marrietal decisions in relation to gender norms. First, I conducted a comprehensive search of PsycINFO, JSTOR, and Google Scholar using combinations of the keywords intelligence, cognitive ability, mate selection, marriage, and gender differences for publications between 2000 and 2025. Peer-reviewed journal articles, book chapters, and large-scale working papers were retained if they (a) examined intelligence or closely related cognitive constructs and (b) linked them to romantic or marital outcomes. To ensure breadth and reduce selection bias, I also hand-searched reference lists of the most-cited papers and included salient older “classic” studies frequently referenced in contemporary work. Each source was appraised for methodological rigor (sample size, measurement validity, statistical controls) and theoretical contribution, then coded for core findings, population studied, and limitations. Finally, the evidence was organized into thematic clusters (evolutionary explanations, socioeconomic mediators, and cultural moderators), which served as building blocks for the conceptual synthesis presented in the discussion. This integrative approach allows disparate quantitative results and qualitative insights to be combined together into a coherent narrative, portrarying the consensus, contradictions, and gaps that warrant future empirical testing.

4. Results

4.1. Evolutionary-psychological mechanisms

Gender differences in marriage preferences may derive from evolutionary and social conditioning. Traditional marriage patterns vary across cultures, yet often share common features. These include patriarchal structures, where men are the dominant figures in the family and women take on nurturing roles, reflecting societal preferences. According to parental investment theory [8], historically, men have emphasized traits associated with reproductive potential, such as youth, physical attractiveness, and other fertility indicators. In contrast, women have prioritized traits related to resource acquisition, including social status and financial stability, indicating a long-term commitment to the household. In modern society, men continue to prefer partners who display submissiveness and have lower SES and IQ, in order to maintain their self-esteem; conversely, women generally prefer partners with stronger financial capabilities and higher IQ and educational backgrounds, seeking a more secure living environment [9,10,11]. IQ serves as a reliable metric for gauging cognitive abilities, depicted by the bell-curve distribution. One of the most widely used IQ tests is the Wechsler Intelligence Scale, which has a mean IQ positioned at 100 and a standard deviation of 15 [12]. An individual with an IQ of 115 is in the 84th percentile, meaning approximately 84% of people have a lower IQ than this person. For women in the 84th percentile, their mate selection preference is within the top 16th percentile, as they are more likely to desire partners who are "better" and more successful than themselves. Conversely, for men in the 84th percentile, their selection can fall anywhere below the 84th percentile, indicating a preference for partners who are less accomplished to avoid undermining their high status in the household. This may explain why a 15-point increase in IQ is associated with a much lower likelihood of marriage for women and a higher likelihood for men. Ultimately, men favor mates who are less independent than they are, while women prefer more independent partners. This ideology can be traced back to historical societal norms, where "male dominance and female dependence" have shaped gender and marriage expectations for centuries.

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4.2. Traditional marriage, premarital cohabitation and intelligence

In traditional marriage patterns, marriage was often not surrounded by the idea of "love" but for mutual benefit. For example, arranged marriages with parental guidance were common, especially in modern-day India, where most of marriages are pre-arranged [1], for factors including economic and social status elevation. These marriages are especially common in less-developed communities, where marriage is viewed as an essential way to elevate a whole family's status in society. Additionally, traditional marriage patterns' intent of mutual benefit can also derive from the biological perspective, where it showed that "having children" is the top reason for engaging in marriage [13], However, these patterns may solely apply to individuals with lower IQs, who are forced into conforming to societal and parental pressure. For individuals with higher IQs, especially women, more paths are created for them to pursue, including their future career aspirations, which allows them to delay or eliminate marriage.

Today, the widespread acceptance of premarital cohabitation offers a unique chance for individuals, particularly those with higher intelligence, to contemplate the true nature and essence of marriage before committing to it. As social norms change and attitudes towards marriage and cohabitation evolve, the trend of premarital cohabitation rises markedly from late 1970s in western countries [14]. As mutual compatability and automomy are priorizted, premarital cohabitation allows them to experience the responsibilities of a relationship, negotiating rules and setting clear guidelines to build compatability. For men, this cultivates a period of adaption—sharing responsibilities and rules—which fosters personal growth that allows them to become a better husband. Yet, for women, cohabitation provides time for re-evaluation whether they are willing to uphold traditional responsibility associated with marriage, including the roles of a wife and mother. Therefore, premarital cohabitation is likely to decrease the change of engagement, where 34% of American marriages in a study's survey ended among those who cohabited before engagement, compared to the 23% of engagements who lived together after being engaged, according to a report from the Institute for Family Studies [15]. Intelligence may modulate the link between premarital cohabitation and marriage decisions. Individuals with lower IQs are more likely to marry impulsively [16], skipping the premarital cohabitation, which reduces their chances of experiencing short, unsatified marriages.

4.3. Maslow's hierarchy and gendered motivations

Maslow's hierarchy of needs, a famous motivational theory in psychology, can also be applied to explain how IQ influences marriage decisions between genders from an evolutionary perspective. According to this theory, human motivation stems from a hierarchy of five fundamental categories: physiological, safety, love, esteem, and self-actualization [3]. In the past, women met their basic needs—such as physiological, safety, and love needs— through marriage. With the progress of industrialization, women attain better education and could fulfill their basic needs through career advancement rather than solely through marriage. In particular, women with higher IQs have greater needs for esteem and self-actualization, which marriage might impede due to traditional gender roles in family.

Society norms that define traditional gender roles in marriage and family can be challenged by intelligence, especially in females. Men are typically expected to be provider, protector, and authority figure, while women often take on the roles of homemaker, primary caregiver and supportive partner. Regardless of gender, more intelligent individuals seek to fulfill higher-order needs. In this context, men with higher IQs will need marriage – in particular, a supportive wife to

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manage the household and maintain family harmony. On the contrary, women with higher IQs may eschew marriage, preferring to avoid endless household chores in order to conserve energy for their own career development. For women who are highly successful in their careers, entering into a marriage that limits their professional opportunities could lead to the termination of their careers. Hence, women with higher IQs may choose not to marry in order to maintain their employment positions.

4.4. Shift from traditional to contemporary gender roles

Females with higher IQs may reflect more on the gender inequality, from ancient to contemporary societal norms, that has profoundly shaped marriage dynamics. In traditional societies, marriage was seen as a crucial path for women to attain financial stability by depending on their spouses. It was viewed as a bond where women could rely on their partners and, in return, become the family's caregivers. Feminine gender roles dictated that women should be confined to domestic responsibilities, preventing them from achieving financial independence or pursuing education and careers.

In contrast, modern society has promoted gender equality and women's empowerment. Women now have greater access to higher education and employment in prestigious fields. Their career success can serve as a barrier to traditional household attachments, as their financial independence means they are no longer confined to domestic responsibilities. This transition has shifted women's roles from that of wives to leaders, individuals who no longer need attachment and enjoy the same status as men, particularly in females with higher intelligence.

Moreover, the challenges women face in marriage, including but not limited to pregnancy, significantly influence their decisions about marital commitment. Pregnancy involves enduring long-term physical strain, pain, and mental challenges, which many women may wish to avoid. Research indicates that approximately 20% of women experience anxiety disorders during pregnancy [17]. Particularly for women with higher IQs, who are often more informed about the potential complications before, during, and after pregnancy, these concerns are especially pertinent.

Past negative experiences of many women have led others to reconsider whether to undergo pregnancy, considering the potential hardships. Pregnancy also triggers a reassessment of household responsibilities, reinforcing women's traditional roles as caregivers, which can hinder their career advancement. Clearly, marriage imposes greater constraints on women than men, particularly through natural factors like pregnancy rather than societal norms.

5. Discussion

5.1. Integrating the four themes

Viewed together, the literatures surveyed converge on a clear empirical regularity: a one-standard-deviation (≈15-point) rise in IQ increases men’s probability of marrying by roughly one-third, yet cuts the same probability for women by more than one-half. Layering the four thematic lenses clarifies why.

Mate-value asymmetries are emphasized by evolutionary psychology. While higher-IQ women challenge traditional male status ideals and are more selective, which lowers match rates, higher-IQ men signal resource acquisition and long-term provisioning, increasing their desirability.

The contrast between traditional marriage and cohabitation demonstrates how women's option value is extended by the growing acceptance of premarital co-residence. Cohabitation allows high-

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ability partners to test their compatibility at home; in particular, it gives women the ability to leave relationships that would reestablish traditional roles of wife and mother, which may lead to a later or dismissed marriage.

According to motivational theories (Maslow's hierarchy), men can satiate higher-order needs through a supportive spouse who upholds harmony in the home, while women's needs for self-actualization and self-esteem outweigh what marriage—still weighed down by gendered labor expectations—can provide as cognitive ability opens up educational and occupational pathways.

All of the above interacts with changing gender norms: For many high-IQ women, but not for equally able men, marriage is a relatively higher-risk, lower-return option due to factors like financial independence, leadership opportunities, and awareness of the costs associated with pregnancy-related careers.

Together, these themes depict intelligence as a key premise that amplifies pre-existing structural asymmetries: it upgrades male bargaining power while simultaneously exposing women to the opportunity costs of traditional marital scripts.

5.2. Theoretical implications

The synthesis suggests that single-discipline models are insufficient. The basic direction of gender divergence is predicted by parental investment theory, but its contemporary magnitude is explained by socioeconomic and motivational factors. The observed cross-national variation is better explained by a multi-level framework, in which self-actualization motives, education, and labor-market incentives modulate the baseline mate-selection heuristics set by evolutionary preferences. The Finnish registry study, for example, demonstrates that although the male IQ–marriage premium remains net of income, its magnitude still decreases when socioeconomic controls are included, suggesting partial mediation as opposed to a pure evolutionary effect. By changing the sequencing and costs of commitment, cultural institutions can also reroute or blunt biological predispositions, as evidenced by the increasing prevalence of cohabitation.

5.3. Limitations of the review

These conclusions are tempered by a number of cautions. First, although the integrative approach is appropriate for developing theories, it depends on the narrative weighting of the evidence; no meta-analytic effect sizes were computed, and publication bias is still a possibility. Second, there are an abudence of focal studies from the US, UK, and Finland, which restricts the generalizability to societies where bride-price or arranged marriage systems are prevalent. This makes the evidentiary base extremely WEIRD (Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich, and Democratic). Third, the majority of research is correlational, which renders it difficult to draw firm conclusions about causality, and intelligence is operationalized differently (through standardized tests, educational attainment, and latent factors). Lastly, the review failed to properly systematically code potentially confounding characteristics like personality, physical attractiveness, or mental health history—all of which may interact with cognition to influence the formation of unions.

5.4. Suggestions for future research

First, cross-cultural longitudinal panels that track cognitive scores, socioeconomic trajectories, and relationship outcomes in non-WEIRD contexts should be implemented. Mixed-methods studies should also be considered, in which probe how high-ability women narrate the trade-offs between

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career, partnership, and motherhood, thereby enriching quantitative findings with lived experience. Furthermore, intersectional analyses examining how class, race, ethnicity, and cultural norms condition the IQ–marriage link, especially in rapidly industrialising regions. Lastly, policy simulations should be conducted to further explore whether childcare subsidies, flexible work arrangements, or paternal-leave reforms could narrow the gender-specific opportunity costs identified here.

6. Conclusion

The influence of intelligence on gender-specific marriage decisions may be shaped by evolutionary factors, motivations, and evolving perspectives on gender roles challenging social norms. Together, these threads explain why, despite the convergence of educational attainment, the IQ-marriage gradient has widened in many late-modern societies. The review offers a logical framework for forecasting who will marry, when, and why in the twenty-first century by combining knowledge from psychology, sociology, demography, and evolutionary biology. Policy experiments that examine whether lowering career and caregiving trade-offs can reduce the gendered marriage gap among high-ability adults and, consequently, change family trajectories in knowledge-based economies are necessary to put these insights into practice. While marriage itself may not be eternal, discussions about it will persist. Understanding these underlying mechanisms could lead to more balanced marriage patterns, ultimately benefiting human evolution and societal development.

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