The Agony of the Aga

November 2004

The Atlantic Monthly

The Wages of Marriage

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The Wages of Marriage—"...when we direct the extra-ordinary intelligence (self)-interest..."

What is a Name?

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Why married men earn more money; why “Dave” is sexier than “Paul”; the coming real-estate crash; does the Times best-seller list matter?

SCIENCE & TECHNOLOGY

ET, Phone Earth

The first close encounter may be closer than you think—if by “close encounter” you mean a radio encounter over light-years of interstellar space. According to calculations by Seth Shostak, the chief astronomer at the Search for Extraterrestrial Intelligence (SETI) Institute, if there is intelligent life elsewhere in our galaxy, advances in computer processing power and telescope technology will enable us to detect its transmissions within the next two decades. Shostak’s projection relies on the admittedly speculative estimate that—based on the number of stars in the Milky Way, the number of stars likely to have planets, and the number of planets likely to have life—10,000 to one million alien radio transmitters may be broadcasting from within our galaxy. (Other opinion, he allows, “averts that no other contemporary, sentient galactic societies exist.”) Shostak assumes, as do many other scientists, that computer processing power will continue to double every eighteen months for the next ten years (it has reliably done so for four decades in a row), and then double only every thirty-six months in the following decade. These increases will allow for ever faster canvassing of the galaxy, and for reception of alien signals somewhere between 2014 and 2027. Of course, the transmitting civilizations will be 200 to 1,000 light-years away, and sending a reply will take centuries. All the more reason to start thinking about what we’re going to say.

—“When Will We Detect the Extraterrestrials?,” Seth Shostak, SETI Institute

SOCIETY

The Wages of Marriage

Getting married has long been thought to be an excellent career move for men, who tend to earn considerably more when hitched than when single. The question, of course, is whether the higher salaries are actually caused by marriage or merely reflect a correlation between the qualities that make a good mate and those that make a good employee. A partial answer is provided by two economists who took a sample of married and unmarried men, controlled for education level and age, and found that the married men earned 20 percent more than the single ones. Then the economists looked at identical twins (thereby controlling for factors such as upbringing, physical attractiveness, mental capability, and so on) and found an even more pronounced marriage effect: the married twins earned 27 percent more than their unmarried brothers. The authors cite what they call the “popular explanations” for this marriage premium—employers are biased toward married men, and marriage allows men to spend less time on domestic chores and more time in the office—and then offer one of their own. “Because the income of married men affects the well-being of their spouse and children,” they write, “married men are likely to “work harder and more assertively seek out raises and better job opportunities.”

—Are All the Good Men Married? Uncovering the Sources of the Marital Wage Premium,” Kate Antonovics (UC–San Diego) and Robert Town (University of Minnesota)

What’s in a Name?

If you feel that the opposite sex isn’t giving you the attention you so richly deserve, maybe you should consider making a change—a name change, that is. According to a preliminary study by an MIT cognitive scientist, the vowel sounds in people’s names may have an impact on how others judge their attractiveness. Specifically, when the men in the study were assigned names with a stressed front vowel (a vowel sound spoken at the front of the mouth), they were rated as more attractive than when they were assigned names with a stressed back vowel. (In other words, good news for Dave, Craig, Ben, Jake, Rick, Steve, Matt; bad news for Lou, Paul, Luke, Tom, Charles, George, John.) In women the effect was reversed, and a stressed back vowel (Laura, Julie, Robin, Susan, Holly) boosted sex appeal, whereas a stressed front vowel (Melanie, Jamie, Jill, Tracy, Ann, Liz, Amy) had the opposite effect—to the author’s disappointment, no doubt.

—“What’s in a Name? The Effect of Sound Symbolism on Perception of Facial Attractiveness,” Amy Perfors, MIT

FOREIGN AFFAIRS

All in the Family

Family-owned companies are bad for business, a new study argues—at least when they dominate a large chunk of a country’s economy. Outside the United States and the United Kingdom, most major corporations are in the hands of a few wealthy families, rather than being owned by a wide network of shareholders. The power of these small families often extends far beyond the companies they own directly, thanks to a system of “control pyramids” in which they exercise indirect control over a slew of smaller companies. This concentration of corporate power doesn’t merely leave a high percentage of wealth in the hands of billionaires (see chart)—it also retards growth, diminishes efficiency, and limits economic freedom. Moreover, “a tiny elite that cannot be sacked,” as the study puts it, is likely to pursue “economic entrenchment,” in which property rights and financial openness are curbed to protect a few families’ economic and political prerogatives.

—“Corporate Governance, Economic Entrenchment and Growth,” Randall Morck, Daniel Wolfenzon, and Bernard Yeung, NBER

United Kingdom

South Africa

Japan

Turkey

United States

Western Europe

Latin America

Southeast Asia

BILLIONS AND BILLIONS

Dollars in billionaires’ hands per thousand dollars of annual GDP

0 20 40 60 80 100 120 140

NOVEMBER 2004