

The Atlantic

Why More Young Married Couples Are Keeping Separate Bank Accounts

It doesn't signal a lack of trust—to some, it's a way for spouses to show they trust each other more.



Photodisc / Getty

CAROLINE KITCHENER

APR 20, 2018 | FAMILY

Like *The Atlantic's* family coverage? Subscribe to [The Family Weekly](#), our free newsletter delivered to your inbox every Saturday morning.

SIGN UP

A joint bank account has, traditionally, been a sign of commitment. As newlyweds start their lives together, it is perhaps the clearest way for them to say, to each other and to the world, “What’s mine is yours, and what’s yours is mine.”

But these days, some young couples are skeptical. “There has been a generational change,” said Joanna Pepin, a doctoral candidate at the University of Maryland who studies the organization of money in romantic relationships. “The research we have shows that, cross-culturally, more people are keeping money separate.” Indeed, a Bank of America study [published](#) earlier this year seemed to suggest that Millennial married and cohabitating couples were more likely to hold separate accounts than previous generations were.

Pepin says this trend is particularly pronounced among low-income couples, who are likelier to value access to their own earnings over the show of commitment and loyalty that comes with the decision to merge finances, a quality often prioritized by higher-earners.

Some of this has to do with Millennial marriage trends more generally. Compared to previous generations, Millennials get married later in life, and thus significantly more of them live together before marriage. Because cohabiting couples are far more likely than married couples to keep finances separate, a certain inertia develops. “Once you’ve established your relationship norms,” Pepin asked, “why would you change them?”

When today’s young adults do decide to get married, many of them are further along in their careers, with a better sense of who they are and what they contribute to their workplace. One 29-year-old I talked to, a medical resident in San Francisco, told me that for those who believe one’s bank account offers a clear reflection of a person’s work ethic or success, it can be hard to cede control. “It’s about wanting to maintain one’s sense of identity, individuality, and

autonomy,” said Fenaba Addo, an assistant professor of consumer science at the University of Wisconsin–Madison.

When I asked several married Millennial couples why they decided to keep their finances fully or partially separate, one reason came up more than any other: A joint bank account seemed to blur each individual’s financial contributions at a time when women are earning more than they used to. “If we just had a joint account, it would bring an uneasy feeling—a sense of inequality,” said Zack Pasillas, a 26-year-old office worker from Orange County, California. Zack’s wife, Karina, works in customer service at the local water company. She knows that, in the future, she’ll likely make less money than Zack, but that makes her even more eager to keep their finances separate. “When buying him gifts, when picking up the tab at dinner, I like knowing that I am also contributing to this relationship,” she said. “It’s my work—it’s my money.” Another Millennial I talked to worried that, if he and his wife merged bank accounts, their relationship might begin to conform to antiquated gender roles, with the man in charge of all the finances. The concept of a joint account, to him, felt dated.

Through the mid-20th century, the vast majority of married women [relied](#) completely on their husband’s salary.* Until the Equal Credit Opportunity Act passed in 1974, it was difficult for many women to [establish](#) their own line of credit—they had no choice but to depend on joint accounts. Now that the American workforce is [47 percent](#) female, there is a sense that perhaps women shouldn’t so readily put their money in a place where it doesn’t fully belong to them. In a [forthcoming](#) study, Pepin asked respondents to select an “income

allocation strategy” for a variety of hypothetical couples. When the woman was the primary breadwinner, respondents suggested that she withhold more income than the man in situations when he was the higher-earning partner.

Similarly, many women getting married for the first time nowadays are keenly aware of how easily wives can lose control of their own finances, said Maggie Germano, a women’s financial coach based in Washington, D.C. Many of Germano’s clients grew up in homes where their parents shared a joint account, which meant that their fathers handled all the money.

“In a lot of those cases, the mother of my client ended up in a precarious financial situation because she had no say over what was happening with her finances,” Germano said. “My clients want to make sure they never end up in a situation where they don’t know what is going on.” That perspective, she says, leads many of her married Millennial clients to opt for separate bank accounts. Pepin, when I talked to her about this, added, “Women may have access to money when you pool total household income, but that doesn’t necessarily translate to control.”

Some worry that this trend of keeping money separate doesn’t bode well for Millennials’ relationships. According to a 2006 [study](#) published in the journal *Gender & Society*, couples who merge their finances are more likely to stay together than couples who don’t.

“When couples maintain their accounts separately, it’s indicative of a certain lack of trust, and a lack of commitment,” said W. Bradford Wilcox, the director of the National Marriage Project at the University of Virginia.

But another scholar who specializes in families, Jeff Dew, an associate professor at Brigham Young, was skeptical about using the results of a 12-year-old study when thinking about today's young newlyweds. "If Millennials are a quantitatively different generation," he said, "those numbers may not apply to them."

Indeed, the 20- and 30-somethings I spoke with all felt strongly that separate bank accounts don't signal a lack of trust—if anything, they said, it's a sign that partners trust each other more. Zack and Karina Pasillas have a clear understanding that, if either of them needs money, they'll help each other out. Their debts are due, and their salaries come in, at different times of the month, so sometimes one will cover the other. "It's about having trust that, if needed, I can cover her end, and she can cover my end, too," Zack Pasillas said.

Going into their marriage, he and his wife knew married couples fight about finances more than anything else. "It's the one thing we don't ever want to argue about," Zack said. Using one account for everything, they told me, leads to unnecessary conflict; the true sign of commitment is to split the bill down the middle.

** This article originally misstated the century. We regret the error.*

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

CAROLINE KITCHENER is an associate editor at *The Atlantic*, and the author of *Post Grad: Five Women and Their First Year Out of College*.

 Twitter
