ASK ARIELY

Should Money Cut Into a New Marriage?

Dan Ariely answers reader questions on parental subsidies and divine projections

By DAN ARIELY
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Dear Dan,

My partner and I will soon be married, and in honor of the event, his parents have promised us some money. Now my parents have offered us double that amount. How can I tell my partner without making him feel uncomfortable? —Nikki

Congratulations—I hope you'll have a lovely wedding and a good life together.

As for your question, the problem isn't just that your future husband and his parents will feel uncomfortable; it is also that your dynamics as a newlywed couple will proceed from an uneven starting point. I am not suggesting that every time that the two of you fight, you will remind your husband that it was your family's money that let you buy a new house. But even small inequalities at the start of a marriage can have long-term effects.

If I were in your shoes, I would ask your parents to give you the same amount now that your fiancé’s parents are giving—then give you the second amount in a year, once the marriage is more established. (If you're not sure you will stay together, maybe ask them to wait five years.)

Incidentally, since weddings are irrational in so many ways, I recently obtained a license to perform weddings through some online site—and now I'm waiting for the first couple to ask me to conduct their nuptials (hint hint).

Dear Dan,

Why are there so many religions, all of which suggest that God is on their side and holds the same values that they do? —Moshe
One answer comes from a 2009 study by Nick Epley and some of his colleagues at the University of Chicago. They asked religious Americans to state their positions on abortion, the death penalty and the war in Iraq, and then asked them to predict the opinions on these issues of a few well-known individuals (such as Bill Gates), President Bush, the "average American" and—unique to this study—God. (The study is described in Dr. Epley's recent book, "Mindwise: How We Understand What Others Think, Believe, Feel and Want.")

The respondents were rather objective about predicting the opinions held by their fellow humans, but they tended to believe that God had similar opinions to their own. Conservatives believed that God was very conservative; liberal believers were certain that God was more lenient.

To find out why we view God so flexibly, a follow-up experiment asked another group of participants to take the position on the death penalty diametrically opposed to their own and argue it in front of a camera. Research on cognitive dissonance has shown that people who are forced to argue for an opinion opposite to their actual one feel so uncomfortable with the conflict that they're likely to change their original opinion. After giving their on-camera speech, participants were again asked to express the views on these hot-button issues of the study's famous individuals, President Bush, the "average American" and God.

The results? After expressing the opinion opposite to their original one, individuals became more moderate. Those who disliked the death penalty became less opposed; those who were for it became less so. But there was no such shift in participants' predictions of the views of the well-known individuals, President Bush or the "average American."

And what about their predictions of God's views? Participants tended to attribute the same position as their own new, more moderate viewpoint to God. God, apparently, is something of a blank slate onto which we easily project our own views. We subscribe to the religious group that supports our beliefs, and then we interpret Scripture in a way that supports our opinions.

So if there is a God, I believe—no, I'm sure—that (s)he thinks the way I do.