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## What Are We Fighting Over When We Fight Over Money?

By CATHERINE RAMPELL

In yesterday's [Week in Review](#), I delved more deeply into a [working paper](#) about how “spendthrifts” and “tightwads” tend to marry each other. (The study flies in the face of most psychological research, which finds that birds of a feather usually flock together, sometimes [in weird ways](#).) This turns out to be an unfortunate attraction, since such dichotomous couples report more marital conflict.

In the context of this research, the terms “spendthrift” and “tightwad” referred not to how much people actually spend, exactly, but how they *feel* about their spending. Tightwads have a lot of trouble parting with their dough, and feel like they should be spending more but somehow can't bring themselves to do so. Spendthrifts on the other hand don't feel enough of that same nagging feeling when spending, and then afterward regret shelling out so much cash.

Perhaps because they hate in others what they hate in themselves, these financial opposites tend to marry. And not surprisingly, when these people marry, they fight about money.

But what are they *really* fighting about?

To a psychologist, such financial feuds might arise because the spouses have different levels of pain associated with spending, no matter what the purchase is. But to an economist, such fights are not about the affects associated with money — they're about head-butting priorities.

I recently spoke with [Betsey Stevenson](#), an economics professor at the University of Pennsylvania, about economic views of consumerism, coupling and conflict.

“People are not really fighting over money,” said Professor Stevenson. “They're fighting over an *allocation* of money.”

In other words, it's not the act of buying that should concern couples, but what's being bought, and the opportunity costs of that purchase. Money-related fights aren't about whether one person has the character of a cheapskate or the qualities of a wastrel; it's about withholding spending on something that someone else sees as important, or freely spending on something that someone else sees as less important.

Noting that money is just a medium of exchange, Professor Stevenson said, “I've certainly seen people fight about ‘money,’ but what they were really upset about is that all the cash to going to buy things for the kids. Or that the family never took a nice vacation without the kids. Or they have no money for retirement, causing a lot of anxiety as well as realistic perceptions of working at old ages — or consumption falling in old age.”

When you're in a relationship that feels mismatched in attitudes toward spending, she continued, “What

you're really mismatched on is how much do you want to consume today versus tomorrow, or in retirement — not how much do you want to consume, period.”

I'm torn on these dueling explanations. Based on the very small sample size of couples who have openly fought over spending in front of me, my sense is that the explanation probably depends on the couple. For some the conflict arises over a matter of rational, long-term priorities; for others, the issue is an intractable personality clash.

Which explanation — if either — rings truer to you when you think about why couples argue about family finances?