



Original Article

Men's revealed preference for their mates' ages

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ABSTRACT

Both young and old men say that they are sexually attracted to young, fertile women, but older men tend to marry older women, including those who are peri- and post-menopausal. We assessed men's freely revealed preference for their mates' age using an unusual marriage phenomenon in South Korea: the practice in which men purchase their brides from developing countries. Presumably, the men's mate choice, at least regarding the brides' age, is unrestricted by women. We analyzed all first marriages reported in 2010–2014 in South Korea and compared men who married Korean brides ($N = 1,088,457$) with those who purchased their brides ($N = 45,528$); the age range of grooms and brides was 15–59. While the former exhibited the typical pattern where older men married older women, the latter, whether young or old, always married young, fertile women. This finding is consistent with men's stated preference for young, fertile women in mating and suggests that the typical pattern is generated by women's limiting role in mating.

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1. Introduction

Discrepancies between preferences and behavior are everywhere and have long been studied. Modern economics typically utilizes revealed preferences, ignoring verbal preferences and trusting preferences revealed by behavior. Similar discrepancies are found in human mating, raising the question of whether it is useful to ask people about their ideal partner preferences to understand the process of relationship formation (Eastwick, Luchies, Finkel, & Hunt, 2014). This issue is important because research on interpersonal attraction and the preference for certain attributes in a mate is based on the assumption of the predictive validity of ideal partner preferences (Campbell, Pink, & Stanton, 2015; Finkel & Eastwick, 2015). In this context, we examined one strong, pervasive preference: age difference in a married couple.

In human mating, men are limited by access to fertile women while women are limited by access to resources for themselves and their offspring (Trivers, 1972). Therefore, it would be expected that men desire fertility-related traits in female mates more than women do, and women desire resource-related traits in male mates more than men do (Sohn, 2015b, 2016a, 2016b, 2016c, 2016d). When younger women are more fertile and older men have more resources, men would be more sexually attracted to younger women, and women to older men. This sex difference has been widely reported (for recent examples, see Conroy-Beam, Buss, Pham, & Shackelford, 2015; Conway, Noe, Stulp, & Pollet, 2015).

Despite men's stated preference for young, fertile women regardless of their own ages, older men tend to marry older women, even those

approaching or past menopause (Antfolk et al., 2015). Therefore, it is unclear whether what men say about their preference for a partner's is not true, or is true but somehow prevented from being realized. An evolution-based explanation is that women have different preferences. Women invest more energy than men in producing offspring via conception, gestation, and lactation. They thus choose high-quality mates who can promote the survival of offspring to reproductive age, such as by providing food, shelter, territory, and protection (Trivers, 1972). Over the lifespan, a man's amount of resources generally increases, but so too does his risk of death. Hence, women should prefer men older than themselves, but not too much older. Otherwise, women risk having to raise their offspring alone, thereby reducing the potential for their offspring to survive to reproductive age (Marlowe, 2001). Securing another mate is an option, but given the male aversion to cuckoldry, this is a difficult and even dangerous one (Hrdy, 1999, ch. 5). Therefore, women are considered to be a limiting factor over which men compete, and women shape the age difference within couples.

If this logic is correct, we should see both old and young men marry young, fertile women (not older men marrying older women) when women's limiting role is lifted. We examined this idea by exploiting a situation where men are relatively free of women's limiting role. A growing number of Korean men marry foreign women from developing countries, and most of the brides are suspected to be de facto purchased (for a general overview, see Kim, 2006). This practice started in the early 1990s, when elderly bachelors in rural areas married Korean women from China. This was facilitated by the normalization of diplomatic relations between Korea and China in 1992. Over time, the brides' countries of origin diversified into Southeast Asia, South Asia, and Central Asia. Note that we use the word "purchase" to describe this phenomenon. Although this word may sound inappropriate, it is an accurate description of what happens. Typically, a man pays an initial fee to a

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matchmaker, and the matchmaker lines up a number of potential brides. The man picks one of them, pays an additional sum to the matchmaker and, when necessary, pays a bride price to the bride's family. A single trip, shorter than a week, to the bride's country suffices to complete the match. During the process, the two parties exchange notarized documents regarding basic demographics (including age), health, and socioeconomic status. Professional matchmakers are heavily involved in every step toward the match. They do whatever their clients ask, even misinforming potential brides of the groom's socioeconomic and health status; the pay structure promotes this behavior. Because the cost is low, even poor men can participate. In fact, so many poor men without appropriate accommodations married in this way that the Korean law was revised in April 2014 to allow only a person with a certain level of income and appropriate accommodations to invite a foreign spouse. Furthermore, individuals from different countries often speak different languages, making verbal communication between spouses married in this way very difficult, except with Korean women from China. Because this problem was widespread, the revised law now requires a foreign spouse to speak at least a basic level of Korean. Another problem is chronic domestic violence against foreign brides, which is partly attributed to their language incompetence. These aspects of bride-purchasing suggest that the bargaining power of purchased women is quite weak before and after marriage, with grooms able to freely act on their preferences for their brides' ages.

Inspired by evolutionary psychology, we hypothesized that men who purchase brides marry young, fertile women regardless of their own ages, while other men follow the usual pattern (i.e., older men marrying older women) regardless of their countries of origin. We tested this hypothesis by analyzing all first marriages and found supportive evidence. The marriage data allowed us to observe not what men said but what men did; that is, their actions revealed their preferences. In addition, the large number of observations improved statistical precision. We considered the years 1991–2014 to understand general trends but focused on the years 2010–2014, for which the bride's country of origin was available, for our in-depth analyses. We selected countries from which Korean men usually purchase brides and compared, for each age of the grooms, the ages of brides purchased from these countries with Korean brides' ages.

2. Methods

2.1. Data

We analyzed all digitally available microdata on marriages in 1991–2014. The dataset contained not a sample but a population because grooms and brides have to report to the government to have their rights and obligations as husbands and wives legally acknowledged. Most couples reported their marriages to the government soon after the date of marriage, but a minority reported much later or even earlier than the date of marriage. For example, 305,507 couples reported their marriages in 2014, of which 75.4% were married in 2014, 17.2% in 2013, 7.0% before 2013, and 0.5% after 2014. Considering these four groups—those married in the reporting year, those married in the year prior to the reporting year, those married more than a year prior to the reporting year, and those married after the reporting year—we excluded the last two groups because they could differ from the first two groups in terms of age difference in a couple. In addition, the last group was so small as to be statistically unimportant. As for the third group, we could not distinguish between the following cases, which could potentially introduce bias. Consider two couples who married in 2011: one of them reported their marriage in 2014 and the other did not report their marriage and then divorced in 2013. The latter might have wanted to report their marriage in 2014 but did not need to any more. We could not include the latter by definition while including only the former would result in selection bias. We thus considered only couples who married in the reporting year or the preceding year.

The grace period of one year allows enough time for couples to report their marriages but not enough time for most couples to divorce. The period is also relevant to this study because it takes at least two years for a foreign spouse to be naturalized. Including couples who married much earlier than their reported year would make it difficult to distinguish between spouses who were or were not purchased before naturalizing. That said, including the last two groups did not change the pattern of our main results (not shown). Both grooms and brides in this study were entering into their first marriages. We included only first marriages because remarriage introduces new complexities, such as offspring from the first marriage and greater discrimination against divorced women than divorced men. Because the absolute majority of them were aged between 15 and 49, we focused on this age range. For completeness, however, we considered grooms and brides aged up to 59. All ages in official documents follow the western system.

Not all foreign brides were purchased. Some foreign women worked for pay in Korea and married Korean men. We attempted to exclude such brides by excluding naturalized brides. We also used the bride's country of origin to further isolate purchased brides. This information was available only for the years 2010–2014; therefore, we pooled these years. Using the bride's country of origin is not the optimal way to identify purchased brides, but it was the best means available for this dataset. The purchase of brides relies heavily on professional matchmakers; therefore, we surveyed their advertisements and determined popular countries of origin for the purchase. In this study, the bride-selling countries comprised Vietnam, China, the Philippines, Cambodia, Laos, Indonesia, Thailand, Myanmar, Nepal, Pakistan, India, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, Mongolia, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, and the Kyrgyz Republic. Although we cannot confirm that all brides from these countries were purchased, this scenario is very likely and is supported by a national survey. The Survey of International Marriage Brokerage in Korea 2014 interviewed a nationally representative sample of 800 husbands who used matchmakers in the past three years to marry foreign wives; for their marriages, 64.6% visited Vietnam, 10.4% China, 9.8% the Philippines, 7.6% Cambodia, 4.3% Uzbekistan, and 3.3% other countries. Our pattern of results remained the same whether we considered only these five countries (not shown). Browsing this list of countries, one can immediately recognize the importance of matchmakers; most Koreans are unfamiliar with the official languages in these countries. China is an exception, but this case only illustrates the effort required to overcome language barriers. Most purchased brides from China are not Han, the majority ethnic group in China, speaking Mandarin, but instead are Korean residing on the Chinese side of the border between China and North Korea, speaking Korean.

2.2. Identifying four groups

We considered four groups: Korean groom–Korean bride ($N = 1,088,457$), Korean groom–purchased bride ($N = 45,528$), Korean groom–Japanese or US bride ($N = 6144$), and foreign groom–Korean bride residing in Korea ($N = 14,956$). The first two groups were the groups of interest. The third group was intended to show that the difference between the first two groups was not driven by a preference for a foreign bride. The fourth group was intended to show that as long as the bride was not purchased, the age difference in a couple was not affected by the husband's country of origin. In Appendix A, we explain how we identified these groups step by step, and also explain marriage in Korea. Appendix A provides more background information, and it is worth noting that the period of interest came after the peak in bride purchases.

Table A-1 presents the number of marriages by the individual's citizenship status in 2010–2014. The absolute majority of marriages were between Korean grooms and Korean brides, both born in Korea; they constituted the first group. Korean men born in Korea purchase brides; therefore, we considered couples of Korean groom (by birth)

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