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The male-taller norm: Lack of evidence from a developing country



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ABSTRACT

In general, women prefer men taller than themselves; this is referred to as the male-taller norm. However, since women are shorter than men on average, it is difficult to determine whether the fact that married women are on average shorter than their husbands results from the norm or is a simple artifact generated by the shorter stature of women. This study addresses the question by comparing the rate of adherence to the male-taller norm between actual mating and hypothetical random mating. A total of 7954 actually married couples are drawn from the last follow-up of the Indonesian Family Life Survey, a nationally representative survey. Their heights were measured by trained nurses. About 10,000 individuals are randomly sampled from the actual couples and randomly matched. An alternative random mating of about 100,000 couples is also performed, taking into account an age difference of 5 years within a couple. The rate of adherence to the male-taller norm is 93.4% for actual couples and 88.8% for random couples. The difference between the two figures is statistically significant, but it is emphasized that it is very small. The alternative random mating produces a rate of 91.4%. The male-taller norm exists in Indonesia, but only in a statistical sense. The small difference suggests that the norm is mostly explained by the fact that women are shorter than men on average.

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Introduction

Among the many physical attributes of potential partners, height plays an important role in finding a mate to form a reproductive unit. A well-known preference regarding height is that women prefer men taller than themselves; this is referred to as the male-taller norm. This norm is so prevalent that it is also called the “cardinal principle of date selection” (Ellis, 1992: 280); evidence of this is largely based on populations in developed countries (see references in Sorokowski and Butovskaya, 2012). However, since women are shorter than men on average (Gaulin and Boster, 1992), it is difficult to determine whether the fact that married women are shorter than their husbands results from the norm or is a simple artifact generated by the shorter stature of women. This question is of merit because recent studies based on indigenous populations have challenged the argument that the norm is universal (see the literature review); these studies have argued that the norm might be limited to Western populations.

To address this question, one needs to compare the rate of adherence to the male-taller norm between actual and hypothetical random pairings. For this exercise, it is important to distinguish between preferred mating and actual mating. Individuals can say anything when the stake is low, but they have to reveal their true preferences in actual behaviors (Courtiol et al., 2010a). Furthermore, it is desirable to use measured, rather than self-reported, height because self-reported height can be plagued by measurement error and bias (Danubio et al., 2008). One also needs to use nationally representative data to ensure the generalizability of results. In addition, a large sample size is preferred because it improves estimation precision. Furthermore, populations in developing countries can shed new light on the issue because the literature is entirely based on populations in developed countries and indigenous populations. These two sources of evidence are too extreme to determine the generalizability of the norm to the world's population since the vast majority lives in developing countries, and as such, an analysis of a developing country is of interest.

We follow these criteria to test the existence of the male-taller norm in a populous developing country, Indonesia. Among developing countries, Indonesia deserves attention because its population has characteristics of interest for the literature; namely, the Indonesian population exhibits mixed characteristics of populations in developed countries and indigenous populations. For example, Indonesia belongs to the region that has exhibited the shortest height in the world, at least for the past 200 years (Baten and Blum, 2012). Possibly due to this legacy, Indonesians remain short at present even compared to populations in other developing countries. In fact, they are so short that their mean height is similar to those of hunter-gathers and foragers living in subsistence-based economies (Walker et al., 2006). Thus, whereas Indonesia's socioeconomic conditions are more similar to those of developed countries than indigenous societies, inhabitants' heights are more similar to those from indigenous societies than developed countries. In addition, polygamy is legal in Indonesia. In this regard, the Indonesian marriage customs are more similar to those of indigenous societies. However, the practice of polygamy has almost disappeared, and monogamy is the norm. In this regard, the Indonesian marriage customs are more similar to those of developed countries. Moreover, the development stage of the Indonesian economy lies between developed countries and indigenous societies. These intermediate features of the Indonesian population and economy can provide an interesting case to the issue, alongside the two extreme cases (i.e., populations in developed countries and indigenous societies). Furthermore, Indonesian culture is based on Islam rather than Christianity or other religions of indigenous populations; thus, it is possible to investigate whether the male-taller norm is truly universal, regardless of culture.

Literature review

The influence of height on mating behavior has long been studied (e.g., Galton, 1889). Among many mating behaviors, the male-taller norm has been extensively investigated and confirmed for Western populations. Sorokowski and Butovskaya (2012) provided representative studies and briefly discussed them. Pawłowski's study (2003) constitutes an example for a Western (Polish) population. A notable feature of this study is that he considered the significance of relative rather than absolute height when studying height preferences. In addition, 363 women and 161 men in his study were presented six

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