



Comparing the role of the height of men and women in the marriage market



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ABSTRACT

This paper explores how the role of men and women's height in the marriage market has changed across generations. Using individual-level data from Japan, we compared the effect of height on marriages between men and women, and investigated how the effect of height on marriage has changed across generations. Our key findings are: (1) for men born before 1965, a 1% increase in height led to an approximately 0.56% increase in the probability of being married. Conversely, for women born before 1965, a 1% increase in height led to an approximately 0.56% decrease in the probability of being married. (2) For men born in or after 1965, a 1% increase in height led to an approximately 1.05% (0.18%) increase (decrease) in the probability of being married (divorced). However, the height effect was not present for women. Japan experienced astounding economic development after World War II, which resulted in changes in its economic and social structure. These changes may have also altered the role of height for Japanese men and women in the marriage market.

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1. Introduction

It is widely acknowledged that physical features such as height contribute to success in the labor market because height is considered to reflect human capital and health conditions (e.g., Schultz, 2002; Heineck, 2005; Dinda et al., 2006; Case and Paxson, 2008, 2009; Gao and Smyth, 2010; Cinnirella et al., 2011; Lundborg et al., 2014; Tao, 2014; Sohn, 2015a; Steckel, 1995). Taller people can earn more, and therefore they are more highly valued in the marriage market.¹ Height exerts a positive effect on marriage success because of an increase in income (Sohn, 2015b). Previous research has provided evidence that tall men have an advantage in the marriage market (e.g., Fu and Goldman, 1996; Harper, 2000; Murray, 2000; Belot and Fidrmuc, 2010).²

Preferences for height and family relationships are thought to change if socioeconomic conditions change. Accordingly, the role of height has changed in the marriage market. However, existing literature has not considered the effect of height differences between male and female partners on the process of social and

structural change (Sohn, 2015b, 2016). Thus, there is a need to address this gap in the literature.

In developed countries, the socioeconomic gap between men and women in society has been reduced (Fortin et al., 2015). Japan experienced rapid economic development in the post-World War II period. This strong economic growth transformed Japan's social structure and women's social status. Accordingly, the gender division of labor appears to have declined and height preferences may have changed. The role of height in mate choice may also differ between generations. Japan's rapid economic development enables us to investigate, from a long-term perspective, how the effect of height difference has changed. Thus, this paper uses data from Japan to examine the different effects of male and female height on marriage and divorce, and to consider how and the extent to which these differences have changed over generations. We found that for the older generation, height is positively and negatively related to marriage for men and women, respectively. In contrast, we found that for younger generations, a positive relationship between male height and marriage is persistent, while the negative relationship between female height and marriage is not. This study provides evidence that the gender difference in the value of height in the labor market has changed in the process of economic development.

The remainder of this paper is organized as follows. Relevant literature is introduced in Section 2. An overview of the data and empirical method is presented in Section 3. Major findings are

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¹ Tall people can also enjoy benefits from acquiring political power (Yamamura et al., 2015).

² Shorter men are less likely to be in a relationship (Herpin, 2005).

Table 1
Summary of previous research examining the relation between height and marital status.

Country/period	Author(s)	Gender/characteristics of studied persons	Were taller persons of this gender more likely to marry?	Keywords
Southern Germany, 19th century	Baten and Murray (1998)	Female prisoners (mostly lower income)	Yes	Height as proxy for health
US born in the period 1832–1879	Murray (2000)	Male	Yes	Height as proxy for health
US in 1860s	Hacker (2008)	Male	Yes	Height z-score (standardized height)
US in the period 1979–1991	Fu and Goldman (1996)	Male	Yes	Height as proxy for health
UK born in 1958	Harper (2000)	Male (Female)	Yes (No)	Height as proxy for earnings-generating attribute for male
UK and US in 21th century	Belot and Fidrmuc (2010)	Male	Yes	Interethnic marriage
Italy around 1900	Manfredini et al. (2013)	Male	Yes in one area (Province of Udine) but not in the other (Province of Sassari)	Inversely U-shaped relation
French in 2001	Herpin (2005)	Male	Yes	Height as proxy for earnings-generating attribute for male
Japan, born 1933–1965	This study	Male (Female)	Yes (No)	Asian country; Patriarchal views
Indonesia in 21th	Sohn (2015b)	Male	Yes	Asian country; Developing country; Height as proxy for earnings-generating attribute

presented and discussed in Section 4. Our conclusions are presented in Section 5.

2. Relevant literature

Educational level is one of the key factors in the search for a partner in the marriage market because human capital, as captured by education, is positively related to marginal labor productivity, and, consequently, to an increase in earnings. According to the assortative mating hypothesis, people with higher educations are favored in the marriage market because they are anticipated to become higher earners; therefore, people with higher education are more inclined to have more highly educated spouses (Scully, 1979; Boulier and Rosenzweig, 1984; Lam, 1988). Thus, a husband's earnings are positively related not only to his education level, but also to his wife's education level.³ Similar relationships hold when we consider the role of height in the marriage market because the male's height is considered a kind of human capital, in that taller men will have a better career (Herpin, 2005) and thereby earn more (Harper, 2000). That is, the husband's earnings are positively related not only to his height, but also to his wife's height (Sohn, 2015b).⁴

The role of height cannot be separated from its socioeconomic context (Steckel, 2009).⁵ Table 1 presents the summary of previous research closely related to this paper. In Italy, the relationship between the probability of marriage for men and male height was monotonically positive in Treppo Carnico, whereas it was inversely U-shaped in Alghero (Manfredini et al., 2013). Furthermore, women place greater weight on the intelligence and race of their partner, while men respond more to physical attractiveness (Fisman et al., 2006). Buunk et al. (2008) found that male height was negatively correlated with jealousy in response to socially influential rivals, whereas female height was negatively correlated

with jealousy in response to physically attractive rivals. These findings suggest that the key features that influence mate choice differ between men and women. Based on data from the United States (1979–1991), shorter men were less likely to get married, while the same was true for taller women (Fu and Goldman, 1996).⁶ Murray (2000) used historical data from the United States to suggest that male height is positively related to marriage, while female height is not. From a similar viewpoint, Hacker (2008) used historical data from the United States to construct height z-scores to examine the influence of height, finding a positive relation between height and ever-married marital status. Furthermore, the effect of male height on marriage is opposite to that of female height on marriage in the United Kingdom (Harper, 2000). However, a negative relation between females' height and the probability of marriage is not generally observed and depends on social background. In a German case, both male and female height were observed to be positively related to marriage (Baten and Murray, 1998).

An interpretation of the contrary effect of male or female height on marriage is that men's evaluations of female height are contrary to women's evaluations of male height. According to the classical work by Becker (1991), the gender division of labor within a household increases household productivity. In societies where women have labor market disadvantages, women have a comparative advantage in housework and become housewives. In contrast, men tend to become full-time breadwinners in the labor market and do no housework. In addition, if height is only valuable in the labor market, taller women are not preferred in the marriage market. Sohn (2016) analyzed the impact of height difference between husbands and wives on happiness in Indonesia and found that women with a taller spouse are more likely to be happy.⁷ This observation is consistent with the argument that the gender division of labor becomes dominant in society because an increase in the number of women in the labor market increases the risk of marital disruption (e.g., Preston and Richards, 1975; Cherlin, 1992). Aside from economic reasons, height is influential in the marriage market (Sohn, 2015b). On average, women have less upper body strength than men, hence in early human development

³ The cross-productivity effect is another possibility; that is, education level increases individual productivity and also possibly plays a critical role in improving a spouse's productivity through household interactions (Huang et al., 2009; Mano and Yamamura, 2013).

⁴ Individuals' earnings were found to be associated with their spouse's body mass index (Chiappori et al., 2012).

⁵ Belot and Fidrmuc (2010) show that height distribution differences are important in explaining the phenomenon that black men are substantially more likely to have white spouses than are black women, but the opposite is true for Chinese men and women.

⁶ Relatively shorter French men were less likely to be in a relationship than their taller counterparts (Herpin, 2005).

⁷ Men do not value women's intelligence or ambition when it exceeds their own (Fisman et al., 2006).

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