



A cut above the rest? Private anthropometrics in marriage markets[☆]



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ABSTRACT

A large body of economic research suggests that publicly observable anthropometric characteristics affect labor and marriage market outcomes. Private anthropometrics may not affect these outcomes. We examine male circumcision in marriage markets in Zambia. Our analysis reveals substantial variation across local marriage markets in circumcision prevalence relative to preference for circumcised partners, as well as excess aggregate demand for circumcised males. Regression estimates suggest a marriage market premium of approximately one-half to one year of additional schooling for matching with a partner of preferred anthropometric type in a local marriage market with excess demand for that anthropometric characteristic.

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1. Introduction

A large body of economic research suggests that anthropometric characteristics affect labor market outcomes and marriage market outcomes.¹ The vast majority

of these studies examine anthropometrics that are publicly observable, such as height, weight, BMI, facial symmetry, and external reviewer assessed physical beauty. We examine an anthropometric characteristic that is not publicly observable, for which tastes are heterogeneous,

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¹ Studies examining anthropometric characteristics and labor market outcomes include: Foster and Rosenzweig, 1994, 1996; Hamermesh and Biddle, 1994; Averett and Korenman, 1996; Baum and Ford, 2004; Cawley, 2004; Persico et al., 2004; Herpin, 2005; Mobius and Rosenblat, 2006; Morris, 2006, 2007; Case and Paxson, 2008; Greve, 2008; Hersch, 2008; Han et al., 2009; Rooth, 2009; Mocan and Tekin, 2010; Renna and Thakur, 2010; Wada and Tekin, 2010; Arunachalam and Shah, 2012; Cawley and Maclean, 2012; Johar and Katayama, 2012; Pitt et al., 2012; Bockerman and Vainiomaki, 2013; Caliendo and Lee, 2013; Mosca, 2013; Price, 2013, and Lundborg et al., 2014. Studies examining anthropometric characteristics and marriage market outcomes include: Averett and Korenman, 1996; Herpin, 2005; Averett et al., 2008; Fisman et al., 2008; Mukhopadhyay, 2008; Belot and Fidrmuc, 2010; Hitsch et al., 2010; Oreffice and Quintana-Domeque, 2010; Sabia and Rees, 2011; Arunachalam and Shah, 2012; Chiappori et al., 2012; Banerjee et al., 2013; Belot and Francesconi, 2013; Manfredini et al., 2013; Dupuy and Galichon, 2014; Wilson et al., 2014; Sohn, 2015, and Oreffice and Quintana-Domeque, 2016.

and for which there is little to no economic evidence on its role in labor and marriage markets.

Anthropometric characteristics that are not publicly observable may be less likely to affect labor and marriage market outcomes. Lack of public observability may reduce the signaling value or conspicuous consumption value of anthropometric characteristics and hence reduce willingness-to-pay. The dynamic nature of private anthropometric revelation to potential matches may also inhibit matching on anthropometrics that are not publicly observable.²

We examine equilibrium matching on male circumcision in marriage markets in Zambia and the association between male circumcision and female schooling (or socioeconomic status). We use national household survey data containing information on female respondents' stated circumcision preference, the circumcision status of their husbands, and basic socioeconomic and demographic information about the respondents and their husbands.

The first part of our analysis reveals excess aggregate demand for circumcised males. Twenty-three percent of women in our sample prefer circumcised partners, yet only 15% of men in the sample are circumcised.³ Among women who prefer circumcised partners, fewer than one-half are matched with a circumcised partner. Although there is excess aggregate demand for circumcised partners, many local marriage markets in our data exhibit excess demand for uncircumcised partners. The existence of excess demand conditions suggests that men who are of the anthropometric type in local excess demand possess a relative advantage in the local marriage market and hence match with more desired women, resulting in a marriage market premium. Although we do not have data on overall "desirability", we proxy for desirability with female educational attainment.⁴

The second part of our empirical analysis provides evidence on whether a schooling premium arises in local marriage markets characterized by excess demand for a particular circumcision status. Our main empirical strategy exploits data on stated preference for circumcised partners, circumcision status of partners, and local marriage market conditions in a triple interaction approach. We regress measures of female schooling on male circumcision status while controlling for other male

and female characteristics. We allow the association between female schooling and male circumcision status to vary by female preference for circumcised partners, local marriage market conditions, and the interaction thereof. We interpret the coefficient on the triple interaction term as the schooling premium for respondents who match with a partner of preferred anthropometric type in a local marriage market with excess demand for that type.

Our results indicate that females who live in areas with excess demand for males of their preferred anthropometric type have approximately one-half to one year of additional schooling if they match with a partner of their preferred anthropometric type. We cannot reject the hypothesis that the association for females who prefer circumcised males, live in areas with excess demand for circumcised males, and match with a circumcised male is the same as the association for females who prefer uncircumcised males, live in areas with excess demand for uncircumcised males, and match with a uncircumcised male. We find little evidence of nonlinearities with respect to level of education and little evidence of heterogeneity with respect to age or household wealth.

The approximate symmetry of the results across locations with excess demand for circumcised males and locations with excess demand for uncircumcised males supports an interpretation of our results in which a premium arises from matching with a partner of preferred anthropometric type in a location with excess demand for that type. For a spurious factor to drive our results, they must be simultaneously correlated with matching with circumcised partners in locations with excess demand for circumcised males and with matching with non-circumcised males in locations with excess demand for non-circumcised males. Moreover, our results are robust to a range of controls for characteristics of the respondent and her male partner, including ethnicity, a major determinant of circumcision status and circumcision preference in our study setting.

This paper contributes to at least two bodies of literature. First, it adds to the economic literature on anthropometric characteristics and marriage market outcomes (e.g. *Averett and Korenman, 1996; Herpin, 2005; Averett et al., 2008; Fisman et al., 2008; Mukhopadhyay, 2008; Belot and Fidrmuc, 2010; Hitsch et al., 2010; Oreffice and Quintana-Domeque, 2010, 2016; Sabia and Rees, 2011; Arunachalam and Shah, 2012; Chiappori et al., 2012; Banerjee et al., 2013; Belot and Francesconi, 2013; Manfredini et al., 2013; Dupuy and Galichon, 2014; Wilson et al., 2014; Sohn, 2015*) by providing some of the first evidence on the effect of a non-visible anthropometric characteristic on marriage market outcomes.⁵ Second, it expands the nascent body of economic literature on male circumcision (*Godlonton et al., 2016; Wilson et al., 2014; Evens et al., 2016; Friedman and Wilson, 2015; Kim et al., 2015; Thirumurthy et al., 2014*) by providing some of the

² The data in our study come from repeated cross-sections, leading us to focus on a static analysis of marriage market outcomes. *Sahib and Gu (2002)* develops a marriage model with incomplete information and learning about partner characteristics in which pre-marital cohabitation allows for improved match quality.

³ We cannot test why women prefer circumcised (or uncircumcised) partners. Evidence from acceptability studies conducted in other sub-Saharan African countries indicates that women who prefer circumcised partners often cite sexual pleasure (*Lagarde et al., 2003; Rain-Taljaard et al., 2003; Mattson et al., 2005*) and hygiene (*Bailey et al., 2002; Mattson et al., 2005; Ngalande et al., 2006*) as important factors. Thus, we interpret a stated preference for circumcised (uncircumcised) partners as a preference for circumcision status and not a proxy for ethnic preference or education preference. In our empirical analysis, we show that our estimates are robust to controlling for ethnicity and other covariates, consistent with this interpretation.

⁴ Similarly, *Chiappori et al. (2012)* uses female educational attainment as a proxy for socio economic status.

⁵ *Rees et al. (2009)* examines the effect of anthropometric characteristics on health, not a marriage or labor market outcome, yet is notable for sharing a similar title with our paper.

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