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Does a taller husband make his wife happier?

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ABSTRACT

Although it has been known that women prefer tall men in mating for evolutionary reasons, no study has investigated whether a taller husband makes his wife happier. We analyzed two datasets (N = 7850) that are, together, representative of the Indonesian population to determine whether this is true. A greater height difference in a couple was positively related to the wife's happiness. This relationship gradually weakened over time and entirely dissipated by 18 years of marital duration. The husband's resourcefulness was a minor mediator in the relationship. We thus argue that the husband's height and its correlates made his wife initially happy, but their influence waned over time. Nevertheless, the long period of the dissipation indicates a powerful impact of male height on women's psychology, probably prepared by evolution.

1. Introduction

Many women say that they prefer tall men to short men. Vaillant and Wolff (2010) documented from French data collected in 1993–1999 that 41% of women specifically mentioned tallness as a desirable trait, whereas only 7.5% of men did. It could be that women only say this but do not act upon it. Pawlowski and Koziel (2002), however, analyzed the lonely hearts advertisements that appeared in Poland between 1994 and 1996, and found that taller men received more responses. This was the same for online dating in Boston and San Diego (Hitsch, Hortaçsu, & Ariely, 2010). One could still object that responses to advertisements, whether online or offline, might be just for fun with no actual consequences. Kurzban and Weeden (2005) employed data provided by HurryDate, which is a commercial dating service aimed at adult singles living in major metropolitan areas of the US; their dataset revealed the participants' choices with actual consequences. They continued to find that women chose taller men more frequently for a date.

Dating does not require serious commitment, so women may behave differently in the case of marriage. Even for marriage, however, taller men are more likely to get married. Although evidence supporting this is not unanimous (Hacker, 2008), a sufficient amount of evidence has been advanced by Fu and Goldman (1996) for the US in 1979–1991, by Harper (2000) for the UK in 1991, by Murray (2000) for the 1884–1899 classes of Amherst College in the US, by Herpin (2005) for France in 2001, by Belot and Fidrmuc (2010) for UK interethnic marriages, and by Manfredini, Breschi, Fornasin, and Seghieri (2013) for two Italian communities at the turn of the 20th century.

One can attribute the origin of the female preference for male height to evolutionary processes. Taller men were perceived to be stronger, and women presumed that taller men could provide more resources and protection for them and their offspring; as a consequence, ancestral women tended to select tall men for mating (Buss, 2003; Courtiol, Raymond, Godelle, & Ferdy, 2010). Such men would also beget male offspring who in turn would be reproductively successful and carry copies of the women's genes—the sexy son hypothesis (Weatherhead & Robertson, 1979). In fact, height is correlated with many positive attributes such as physical strength, cognitive and noncognitive skills, and socio-economic status in contemporary Western countries (Case & Paxson, 2008; Lundborg, Nystedt, & Rooth, 2014; Persico, Postlewaite, & Silverman, 2004) and Indonesia (Sohn, 2015a, 2015e). Women thus perceive male height, correctly or not, as a marker of a good provider.

Considering the female preference for male height, we hypothesized that a woman who marries a taller man is happier. Two points are worth recalling at this point. First, women prefer not just tall men but men taller than themselves, which is known as the male-taller norm (Pierce, 1996). Pawlowski (2003) used six pairs of human outlines with different levels of sexual dimorphism in stature (SDS) and demonstrated that Polish people adjusted their preferences for SDS in relation to their own height. Fink, Neave, Brewer, and Pawlowski (2007) used the same strategy and found the same results for people in Germany, Austria, and the UK. The norm is not universal since it was not clearly observed in some traditional societies (Sorokowski & Butovskaya, 2012; Sorokowski, Sorokowska, Fink, & Mberira, 2011; Sorokowski et al., 2015). However, Indonesia is no longer a traditional society where people hunt, gather, herd, or forage for a living. Indonesian couples exhibit an SDS of 1.07 (Sohn, 2015d, 2015e) and assortative mating (later explained in Fig. 1); an SDS of 1.07 in couples is typical among humans (Gaulin & Boster, 1992; Sohn, in press-c). Indonesians thus

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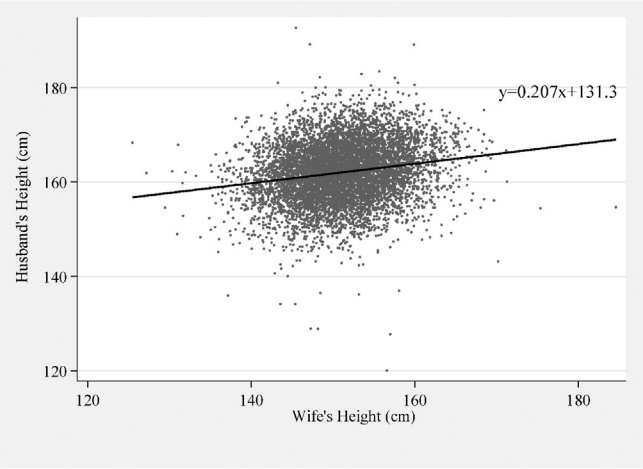

Notes: For the linear fitted line, we applied cross-section sample weights with attrition correction. The correlation coefficient between two statistics was 0.18.

Fig. 1. *Assortative mating by height.*

conform to the norm in actual mating although it is another question whether Indonesians consciously consider the norm in mating (Sohn, 2015d). These findings urged us to consider not only a husband's height but also the height difference in a couple.

Second, marriage is based on commitment, so marriage typically lasts for a certain period. It is thus necessary to consider marital duration. One can consider two scenarios of marital happiness over marital duration. A wife may enjoy happiness to the same degree over time. Alternatively, the sources of initial (un)happiness gradually lose their influence. The wife might get used to her husband's height and its correlates such as physical attractiveness and strength, income, wealth, health, and education. She might lose her characteristics that enabled her to marry her tall husband, such as beauty; the loss could cause her unhappiness directly or indirectly by changing her husband's behavior such as showing less affection to her, more affection to other women, and providing less childcare. We can determine the trend in the wife's happiness by interacting the height difference in a couple with their marital duration, while taking the wife's happiness as the dependent variable. If the interaction term is negative and statistically significant, the weakening hypothesis is preferred; otherwise, the constant hypothesis is preferred.

Aside from the trend in happiness, one may also want to identify the sources of her happiness. There are many sources, and it is impossible to accurately measure all. We thus could not identify all sources, but two potential sources are worth considering. One is the intrinsic value of height; that is, women simply like tall men, while unable to say why. This is similar to people favoring fatty, salty, and sugary foods without knowing exactly why: such foods are essential to survival but were scarce as humans evolved; hence craving such foods increased reproductive fitness in the past (Lindeberg, 2010). Similarly, the female preference for male height increased women's reproductive fitness. We could not directly measure this source, and it was included in the "everything else" category. The other is male resourcefulness, which we could measure, although crudely. The female preference for male resourcefulness in mating is prevalent and related to height. If a husband's height acts as a marker of his resourcefulness, controlling for his resourcefulness would substantially weaken the relationship between his height and his wife's happiness. Otherwise, we have to leave the question unanswered.

We tried to answer these two questions (i.e., happiness trends and sources) by using two datasets that are, together, representative of the Indonesian population. To the best of our knowledge, this study is the first to tackle this issue in the happiness literature. This study is also of importance because only a few studies have discussed the relationships of spousal characteristics to happiness. For example, Groot and Van Den Brink (2002) explained how age and educational differences within couples were related to their happiness. Relatedly, García, Molina, and Navarro (2010) showed that the husband's education level was positively related to his wife's satisfaction with income. Powdthavee (2009) elucidated that one's happiness was positively related to the spouse's happiness. Guven, Senik, and Stichnoth (2012) treated happiness as an independent variable and argued that a gap between happiness levels in a couple was a good predictor for their future divorce. In all, height is missing.

Moreover, this study contributes to regional studies as the country of interest is Indonesia. A series of studies by Sohn (2013a, 2013b, in press-a, in press-b) considered several aspects of happiness in Indonesia, but none of them considered height and happiness in marriage. When height and happiness in marriage are a research topic, the Indonesian population provides a straightforward case because almost all women there marry and divorce is rare (Sohn, 2015d, 2015e,in press-b). Therefore, bias resulting from selection into and out of marriage is minimal. Moreover, when height is considered, Indonesia presents an interesting case because it belonged to the region where the mean height was the shortest in the world over the past two centuries (Baten & Blum, 2012); the population remains one of the shortest populations in the world at present (Sohn, 2014, 2015a, 2015b, 2015c, 2015e, in press-a). When tallness is scarce, women may enjoy more happiness from tallness than otherwise, and consequently, we would find strong evidence of the relationship between height difference in a couple and the wife's happiness in Indonesia.

2. Data

We analyzed two datasets: the Indonesian Family Life Survey (IFLS) and the Indonesian Family Life Survey East (IFLS East). The IFLS, an ongoing longitudinal survey, started collecting data on more than 22,000 individuals in 7224 households in 13 provinces in 1993 (IFLS1); the population of the provinces represented by IFLS1 accounted for 83% of the Indonesian population in the year. Four follow-ups ensued in 1997 (IFLS2), 1998 (IFLS2+), 2000 (IFLS3), and 2007 (IFLS4). Although the survey is a longitudinal survey, we employed IFLS4 because only this follow-up contains the variable of happiness. Of the 10,994 target households, IFLS4 re-contacted 90.6% (6596 original IFLS1 households and 3366 old split-off households), and an additional 4033 new split-off households were contacted.

The IFLS has excluded most of the eastern part of Indonesia for cost and security considerations. There has been, however, a growing interest in promoting a more balanced development and in extending development benefits to the less developed eastern part. In 2012, IFLS East collected data from 7 provinces not covered by the IFLS. We combined IFLS4 and IFLS East and constructed a nationally representative dataset. Of 3159 households selected for IFLS East, 2547 (80.6%) households provided at least a partial interview. These households jointly had 10,887 household members, of which 10,759 (98.8%) provided at least a partial interview, but partial interviews were rare. In addition, 9929 (91.2%) were measured in the biomarker module (including height). These response rates led to the high quality of the data. Moreover, the questionnaires of IFLS East are almost the same as those of IFLS4, so we faced few of the problems that usually arise from merging multiple datasets of different structures.

The dependent variable of interest was happiness, which was measured by the respondent's answer to the following question: "Taken all things together how would you say things are these days—would you say you were very happy, pretty happy, or not too happy?" This question listed three levels of happiness in itself (i.e., very happy, pretty happy, and not too happy), but the respondent was presented with four options: very unhappy, unhappy, happy, and very happy. This question is identical to that of the US General Social Survey and is nearly identical