

# East Asian low marriage and birth rates: The role of social status affordance in long-term mating behavior

Jose C. Yong & Norman P. Li  
Singapore Management University

## Abstract

Countries with a dominantly East Asian cultural population exhibit the lowest marriage and birth rates in the developed world. This study identifies a new latent construct, social status affordance, as an underlying account for the differences in long-term mating outcomes (i.e., marriage and childbearing) between developed East Asian countries and other developed countries. Two key evolutionary aspects — social status as a female long-term mating preference, as well as delayed reproduction due to the scarcity of ecological niches under life history strategy — interact with features of East Asian culture (in particular, cultural values of harmony and deference) to produce delayed long-term mating outcomes. Competition for scarce prestigious jobs in developed East Asian countries leads to the perception of less jobs available that are sufficiently prestigious, which leads to overall lower social status affordance in developed East Asian countries and thus delayed marriage and lower fertility. The results, to a larger extent, support the theoretical propositions, and suggestions for East Asian countries facing low marriage and birth rates are made given the implications of the findings obtained.

## Introduction

### Fertility issues

Reduced fertility rates are concomitant with economic development, industrialization, and urbanization. Various factors underlie falling fertility caused by modernization, such as

- Greater job uncertainty
- Greater incentives to invest in higher education and labor market experience
- Social liberalization and female empowerment
- Declines in marriage rates or delayed marriages

Fertility is defined as the number of offspring per woman, and population sustenance has been postulated to require a replacement rate of about 2.1 — two to replace the parents, and a little extra fertility to make up for mortality. As of 2004, reports from the UN have indicated that at least 25 countries have a fertility rate that is below 1.5 and this number has been increasing steadily.

There are various problems with falling fertility (McDonald, 2007), including:

- Decreasing population size
- Decreased economic productivity
- Ageing populations

### Same same, but different: The East Asian anomaly

Early demographic research on modernized East Asian countries suggested “a convergence to the west” as these countries modernized and caught up with the west, thereby also exhibiting reduced fertility rates. However, while the west has generally managed to slow down its fertility rate decline, modernized East Asian countries have fertility declines that exceed that of their modernized western counterparts. Currently, modernized East Asian countries have the lowest birth and marriage rates in the world (Worldstat, 2013).

The modern East Asian countries of interest in this study include Japan, South Korea, Singapore, Taiwan, and Hong Kong.

These countries exhibit high levels of modernization and economic development, as well as low fertility rates. Culturally, these East Asian countries are similar in that they:

- Have a Confucian philosophical tradition
- Practice various forms of Buddhism
- Use a common writing system
- Have rule-driven governance that emphasizes duty
- Have an achievement-oriented work ethic
- Place enormous prestige on education
- Tend to be collectivistic
- Strongly value social harmony

### Face culture and narrow avenues to status aspirations

The features of East Asian culture underlie the importance of face (Ho, 1976; Leung & Cohen, 2011). As social harmony is very important, individuals in East Asian cultures are unable to raise their social status or acquire prestige through more confrontational means or dominance displays. Such self-interested or conflict-inducing behaviors are socially distasteful and can cause one to lose one’s own face. As a result, the means to gaining prestige or status are more narrow in East Asian cultures, as only non-confrontational forms of social status gains are allowed.

Face culture therefore makes *endowed social status* an obsession among East Asian individuals, and endowed social status refers to social status that is conferred to individuals based on their rank or position in an established organized hierarchy. These include educational and occupational forms of prestige, such as having a high degree or high career position.

### Social status and mating

Females have evolved to prefer males who have adequate social status when seeking a long-term mate. Drawing on Trivers’ (1972) seminal theory of parental investment, researchers have hypothesized that the interaction between ancestral females’ parental investment of their own “intrinsic” physiological resources, through gestation and lactation, and males’ relatively “extrinsic” investments of material resources, such as food, shelter and protection, led to evolved differences in mate preferences between the sexes (Buss & Schmitt, 1993). In humans as well as other mammals, social status is an effective proxy for the ability to acquire and retain resources (Cummins, 2005), and females thus place a premium on male social status. Modern women therefore still value social status and earning power in a mate despite the fact that many women are capable of supporting and acquiring resources for themselves in today’s modern world (Townsend, 1998).

### Social status affordance

Jobs therefore play a crucial role in facilitating East Asian individuals’ mating goals. East Asians depend highly on occupational prestige to confer social status, and men in particular need to acquire social status in order to attract a mate. In addition, the cost of living and starting a family is expensive in developed East Asian countries, which further drives the demand for prestigious jobs that pay well.

Social status thus becomes a kind of “affordance” as it enables the enactment of influence, and enables various life goals, in particular long-term mating, to be achieved.

A fundamental tenet of microeconomics is scarcity, which asserts that heavy demand for a good whose supply remains unchanged will increase the good’s value. Intense competition in developed East Asian countries creates precisely such a dynamic:

As more and more people desire highly prestigious jobs (darkest colored circles), the number of available occupational niches for them decreases, resulting in:

- Greater inequality between higher and lower status jobs
- Smaller number of prestigious jobs available
- Greater ratio of lower status jobs to higher status jobs

Social status affordance is therefore likely to be lower in developed East Asian countries than in other countries. Individuals from developed East Asian countries likely perceive a lower number of sufficiently prestigious jobs available than individuals from other developed countries. More intensive competition for a smaller pool of sufficiently prestigious jobs in EA culture undermines mating behavior. For instance, women may find the dating pool to be insufficiently desirable, or men may spend longer time investing in education and work to get a high status job before considering long-term mating goals.

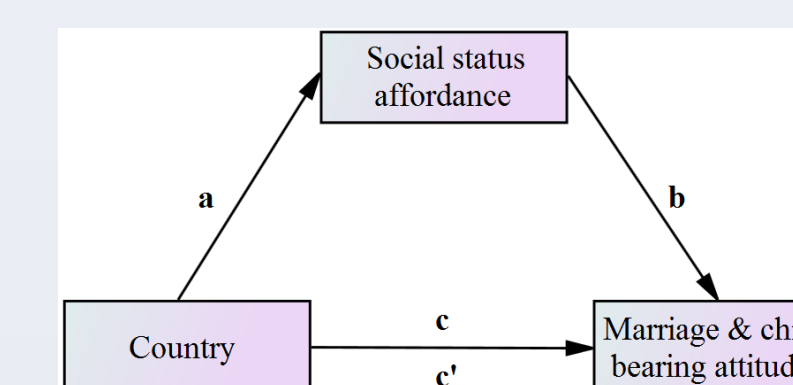
Greater social status affordance therefore plausibly translates to more positive attitudes towards long-term mating goals, including marriage and childbearing.

## Predictions

H<sub>1</sub>: Between-country differences in relevant psychological variables

- Modern East Asian individuals will have less positive attitudes towards having children than modern non-East Asian individuals
- Modern East Asian individuals will have less positive attitudes towards marriage than modern non-East Asian individuals
- Modern East Asian individuals will have lower social status affordance than modern non-East Asian individuals

H<sub>2</sub>: Between-country differences in psychological variables are mediated by social status affordance



## Method

Data was collected from Singapore and Australia as representative samples of developed East Asian and non-East Asian countries respectively.

### Participants

Chinese Singaporean undergraduates from a Singapore university and non-Australian undergraduates from an Australian university took part. In all, there were 169 participants. The Singaporean sample comprised of 67 males and 45 females and the Australian sample comprised of 19 males and 38 females. All participants were volunteers who received course credits for participation.

### Measures

*Attitudes towards marriage.* The Favorableness of Attitudes Toward Marriage Scale (Salts et al., 1994) as modified by Li et al. (2011) was used. Additionally, participants were asked about the age they thought marriage was ideal.

*Desire for children.* The face-valid item, “Having children of my own (at some point) is important to me” (Li et al., 2011), and the number of children desired was used. Additionally, participants were asked about the age they thought having children was ideal.

*Social status affordance.* Social status affordance was measured by assessing participants’ perceptions of a pre-tested list of 36 jobs that is representative of jobs available in modern countries. Jobs were rated based on (1) Prestige, “How prestigious is this job – how esteemed and respected by others will you be if you had this job?” (1 = not prestigious at all, 10 = very prestigious), (2) Acceptability, “How acceptable is the job for you assuming you had the required skill set to do it?” (1 = not acceptable at all for me, 10 = very acceptable for me), and (3) Pay, “How well does the job pay?” (1 = pays very poorly, 10 = pays very well). An average score for each item was computed for each participant.

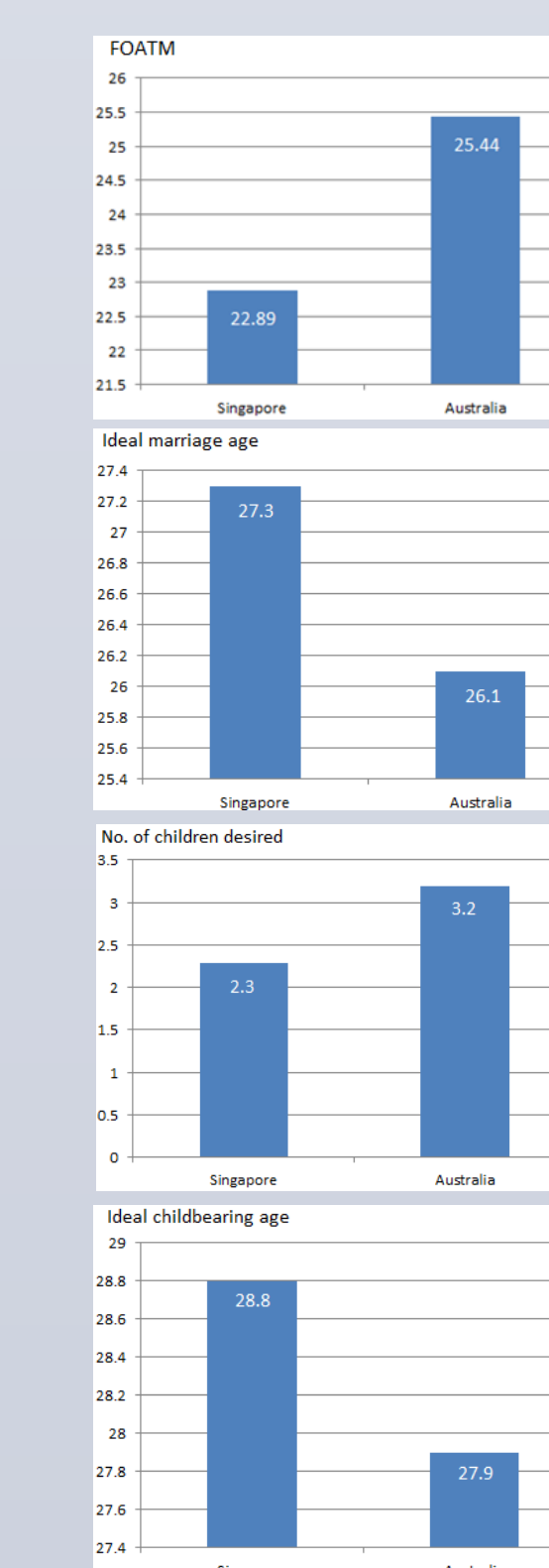
## Results

### Attitudes towards marriage

- Singaporeans had significantly less positive attitudes towards marriage than Australians,  $F(1, 168) = 17.72, p < .001$
- Singaporeans preferred to marry later than Australians,  $F(1, 162) = 9.48, p = .002$

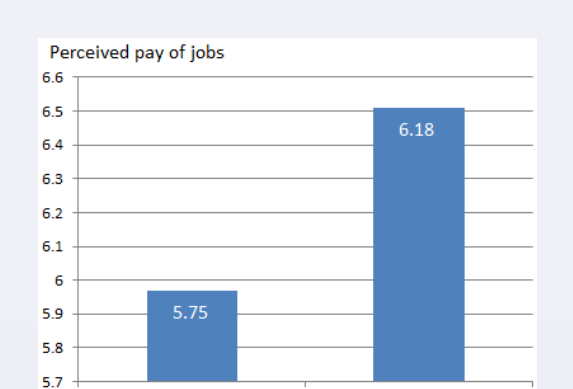
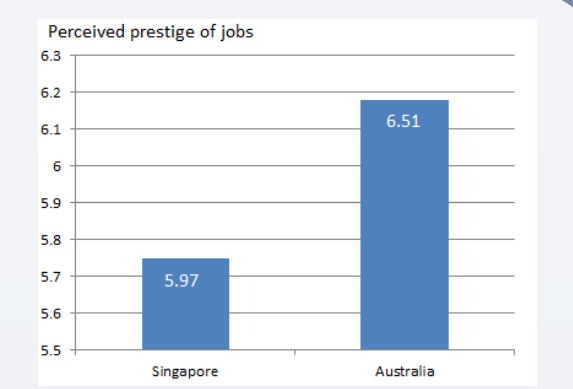
### Desire for children

- No significant difference between Singaporeans and Australians for importance of children,  $F(1, 168) = .422, p = .517$
- Singaporeans desired significantly less children than Australians,  $F(1, 168) = 24.99, p < .001$
- Singaporeans preferred to have children later than Australians,  $F(1, 161) = 4.75, p = .031$



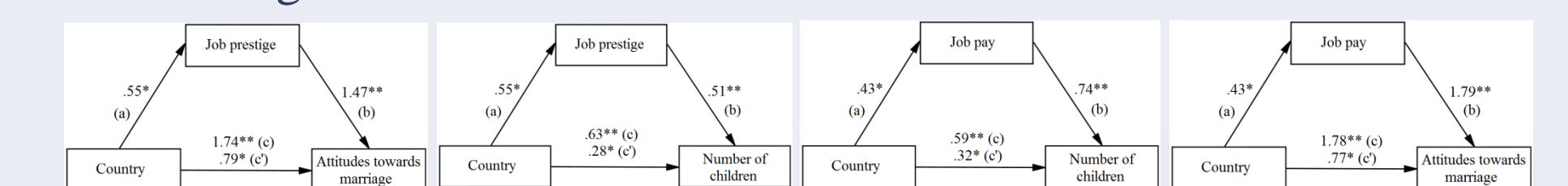
### Social status affordance

- Singaporeans perceived available jobs to have lower **prestige** than Australians,  $F(1, 168) = 12.79, p < .001$
- Singaporeans and Australians did not differ on perceptions of **acceptability** of available jobs,  $F(1, 168) = .775, p = .380$
- Singaporeans perceived available jobs to have lower **pay** than Australians,  $F(1, 168) = 10.37, p = .002$



### The mediating model

- Social status affordance significantly mediated the relationship between country and attitudes towards marriage and childbearing



## Conclusions

Results support to a larger extent the predictions made:

- Singaporeans had less positive attitudes towards marriage and preferred to marry later than Australians
- Singaporeans wanted less children and preferred to start having children later than Australians, even though Singaporeans valued children as much as Australians did
- Singaporeans felt that the prestige and pay of available jobs was overall lower than Australians did. However, there was no difference between Singaporeans and Australians on how acceptable they felt jobs were overall
- Perceptions of job prestige and job pay mediated the relationship between country and attitudes towards marriage and number of children desired, but not the preferred ages of marriage or having children

This study provides preliminary support for the construct of social status affordance as a means to understand the low fertility rates of developed East Asian countries, and the discovery of more factors underlying low marriage and birth rates allows for more ways to deal with the problem. The findings suggest that policies can be enacted to improve the perceived prestige of currently lower status jobs, or increase the minimum wage, as a means to improving the social status affordance of a country, which in turn may increase the rates of marriage and births.

## References

- Buss, D. M., & Schmitt, D. P. (1993). Sexual strategies theory: An evolutionary perspective on human dating. *Psychological Review, 100*, 204-232.
- Cummins, D. D. (2005). Dominance, status, and social hierarchies. In D. M. Buss (Ed.), *The evolutionary psychology handbook* (pp. 676-697). New York: Wiley.
- Ho, D. Y.-F. (1976). On the concept of face. *American Journal of Sociology, 81*, 867-884.
- Leung, A. K.-Y., & Cohen, D. (2011). Within- and between-culture variation: Individual differences and the cultural logics of honor, face, and dignity cultures. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 100*(3), 507-526.
- Li, N. P., Patel, L., Balliet, D., Tov, W., & Scollon, C. N. (2011). The incompatibility of materialism and the desire for children: Psychological insights into the fertility discrepancy among modern countries. *Social Indicators Research, 101*, 391-404.
- McDonald, P. (2007). Time for action: Public policies to revert low fertility. *Pharmaceuticals Policy and Law, 9*, 237-243.
- Trivers, R. L. (1972). Parental investment and sexual selection. In B. Campbell (Ed.), *Sexual selection and the descent of man* (pp. 136-179). Chicago: Aldine.
- Townsend, J. (1998). *What men want—What women want: Why the sexes still see love and commitment so differently*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- United Nations. (2004). *World population policies 2003*. Population Division, ST/ESA/SER.A/230. New York: United Nations.
- Worldstat. (2013). Retrieved 12/11/2013 from <http://en.worldstat.info/>.

## Contact

For further information about this study, you may contact the authors via:

- Jose C. Yong      jc.yong.2012@phdps.smu.edu.sg
- Norman P. Li      normli@smu.edu.sg