Mate Selection Characteristics and Fertility

Kairi Kasearu and Mare Ainsaar

University of Tartu, Estonia

In recent decades many European countries have faced the problem of low fertility. Mostly of the studies have concentrated on characteristics of female fertility behavior, less is known about the effect of male characteristics on fertility and even less attention has been paid on characteristics of a couple. Our aim is to study the connection between mate selection preferences and fertility outcomes.

Previous studies of partnership and fertility have concentrated mainly on the similarity of partners' socio-economic background and the effect of homogamy on fertility. Findings indicate that the couple's educational homogamy leads to a higher rate of completed fertility (Mascie-Taylor 1986) and the level of education of the female partner is more important than that of the male partner (Sorenson 1989). However, Bereczkei and Csanaky (1996) emphasize that the social circumstance are shaping the association between educational assortative mating and fertility outcome, namely in Hungarian society revealed the traditional pattern. The women, who married higher status mates and men who choose younger mates had more children compared to those following alternative mating strategies. Moreover a high level of education of the female partner is often related to the postponement of childbearing, but a high level of education of the male partner does not have such an effect (Gorijn et al 1996). Also there are some studies, which concentrate on the association between religious characteristics of partners and fertility outcomes (Marcum 1986, Kirshnan 1993).

Over decades the studies have indicated that mate selection is gender specific. Classical finding is that females value more than males good financial prospects and educational background in a potential partner and men place more importance on physical appearance – "good looks" and chastity (Hill 1945, Buss and Barnes 1986, Buss et al 2001). Some research has demonstrated that the men's and women's preferences regarding physical attractiveness of a partner are more similar if the partner is considered for a short-term relationship although the meaning of a physically attractive body is very different for women and men (Li and Kenrick 2006). Mostly women value cognitive ability, social skills, height, and conscientiousness more highly than men (Furnham 2009).

Theoretical considerations

The most of the explanations of sex differences in mate selection are derived from the field of sociobiology or evolutionary biology. According to these approaches the mate selection is leaded by desire to pass on genetic material through successful reproduction (Zhang 2009). It means that partners have different strategies according to different level of parental investments and thus they have different mate selection criteria. While women usually make more investments in the reproduction process, they are looking for a partner, who can make a commitment and can afford support for offspring, men prefer women who show signs of reproductive fitness: physical appearance, beauty, health and youth to guarantee reproducing healthy offspring (Trivers 1972, Buss and Barnes 1986). Therefore women would prefer men who are with good financial prospects, higher social status (older), ambitious, strong, brave, higher, demonstrate love and commitment, have positive interaction with

children, dependability, kind and carry similar values with women (Buss 1999:105). Men on the other hand try beside many preferences similar to women's (intelligence, kind, understanding, healthy) to attract younger, beautiful and women with other physical indicators of health and fertility.

However, the recent studies have shown that differences in men's and women's mate preferences are diminishing (Buss et al 2001, Carmalt et al 2008, Press 2004) what might in turned be influenced by changing gender roles. This tendency can be analyzed in the framework of social structure theory. The gender difference in partner preferences is decreasing because the differences of men's and women's positions in labor market are becoming more similar, the gender equality has increased inside and outside family. Therefore it is not surprising that also the styles of parental investments are changing, because of increased women's economic independence and time men's spend with children (Bygren and Duvander 2006, Cabrera et al 2000). Also an increasing number of single parents (Heuveline et al 2003) might encourage ease of the gender specific differences in mate selection criteria. For example men's mate preferences could change towards higher valuation of women's economic capacities (Buss et al 2001, Press 2004). Several surveys show that the women's earnings are associated with their husbands expected earnings (Oppenheimer 1988, Sweeney and Cancian 2004). Moreover, Correia (2003) explains the educational hypergamy, whereby the men tend to marry women who are slightly more educated than themselves in terms of evolutionary theory. Namely, the educational attainment is directly linked to intelligence and men may prefer more intelligent mates in reproductive reasons to have more skilled and gifted successors.

However, the partner selection itself is not simple, but a complex behavior. A study of Carmalt et al (2008) showed that the different characteristic can be exchanged during a mate selection process. For example less attractive female appearance could be compensated by higher socioeconomic status. Selection criteria might be dependent also on market value of a person who makes choices. According to Kalmijn (1998) person consider a set of potential spouses in the marriage market, who are evaluated on the basis of resources they have to offer. This approach belongs to tradition of exchange theory, whereby the individual is offering their own resources in return. According to this approach the final outcome is close equal partnership on the marriage market. The list of resources for exchange is very wide, however sociologist have mostly paid attention on socio-economic and cultural resources (Kalmijn 1998).

According to complementary economic theory of the family, person should choose to pair with another individual whose resources and/or abilities are complementary to one's own to maximize individual wellbeing (Becker 1976, 1981). In societies, where men's and women's roles and responsibilities differ widely, the marriage market behaviors are likely significantly different and structurally related to gender differences in individuals comparative advantages (Arum et al 2008). Consequently, Becker's view is that women will attempt to select spouses with higher earnings, whereas men will select partners with "higher non-market productivity". Women's non-market productivity is reflected by ascriptive characteristics such as being "beautiful, charming and talented" (Becker 1976: 215) and by the ability to raise a child successfully (Becker 1981). The economic theory of the family argues that the production and rearing of children is the main purpose of families and the optimal functioning of family is assured by specialization, whereby women take care of children and household and men are the main breadwinners. Therefore, the higher specialization of partners in different spheres could lead to higher number of children. However, it should be highlighted that the economic theory is gender neutral and holds that the classical division of labor in the family and in the labor market is not so much based on biological sex-differences, but rather is the result of gender-specific educational and training investments. Therefore, it emphasizes

the need for a division of roles but does not strongly suggest who of the partners specializes to family sphere and who is active in labor market.

It is rational to believe that more appropriate mate selection strategy can lead to the higher numbers of children also in modern society. This can be an inheritance of ancestral women who suffered severe costs, if they made mistakes in mate selection. According to Buss (1999: 102) human beings "still possess this underlying psychology, even though the current environment has changed". Also some previous studies have shown some demographic and sex-role differences between women who want and who do not want to have children, and differences in the characteristics of their partners. For example more than the voluntarily childless, single women wanting to have children rated their ideal male partner more highly on traditional masculine and feminine attributes (Callan 1983). The aim of the study is to analyze with empirically representative data, if this notions is still valid in modern society.

Based on theories from evolutionary biology we can hypothesize that women who adopt traditional partner selection criteria in their male partner (socio-economic status, intelligence) selection process might have more children compared to those who do not. And contradictory, men, who tend to value highly partner's attractiveness, sexuality and health will have more children or wish to have more children than those men who emphasize more female partner's economic coping and intelligence.

Method

Fertility and Family Policy Survey conduced in 2008 among 20-40 years old people in Estonia is used for analyses. Survey was financed by the Minister of Population Affairs in Estonia and was designed to analyze family and fertility behavior. Therefore the respondent's age range covers the most fertile age of human beings. Sample was country representative according to age, gender and regional distribution. Response rate was 60.4 (Oras and Unt, 2008).

All together data of 801 respondents were collected. The share of men and women in the final sample was quite equal (Table 1). All together 73% of men and 84% of women had had an experience of either registered or non-registered partnership. 21% of respondents had lived in firm partnership or marriage before, but were separated, 16% had been in partnership/marriage but were living currently separately, 0.4% were widowed, 4.4% had a partner, but did not live together with the partner, 31.2% were currently in unregistered civil partnership and 26,1% currently married.

We are analyzing information about the self reported criteria of a selection of present or future long term partner. The main questions in order to measure preferences was "How important was/is (characteristic) for you during a process of making up a decision in favor of a partner". List of possible selection criteria of a partner was as follows: partner's economic coping capacity, partner's diligence, common values, partner's potential as a parent, partner's intelligence, partner's beauty-attractiveness, good sexual match, partner's health, partner's parents, friends and other acquaintance, occasion, other (please specify). Importance was measured in 3 digit scale (important, important to certain extent, not important at all). All replies "do not know" was recorded as a missing value in analyses.

Main results

Although mate selection features seems to influence life satisfaction and satisfaction with a partner, empirical analyses demonstrated only limited influence of partner selection procedure

on fertility, only for men who selected partner according to sexuality. The results showed strong link between individual family life orientation and number of wished children and number of actual children. Also educational balance of partners and length of a partnership predicted both number and wished number of children.