Sixth Family Research Network (FRN) Forum:
“Singlehood in Singapore: Issues and Challenges”

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Why are People Staying Single?
(and Delaying Marriage and Family)

Insights from Three Lines of
Social/Evolutionary Psychological Research

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Singaporeans are staying single longer...

Data source: Singapore Department of Statistics
and are having less children...
• Mate preference studies across cultures and time:
  – For long-term mates, women not only place greater value on social status than men do (Buss, 1989; Buss & Barnes, 1986; Hill, 1945, McGinnis, 1958, Sprecher, Sullivan, & Hatfield, 1994)...

  – but they also prioritize having a minimum level of social status (Li, Bailey, Kenrick, Linsenmeier, 2002; Li & Kenrick, 2006)
    • Even though most women aren’t holding out for the most affluent men, they tend to require that their long-term mates meet or exceed some minimum level of social status
Hypergamy: Women want to marry up

- Correlation between women’s expected post-college earnings and importance ascribed to “good financial prospect” (Weiderman & Allgeier, 1992)

- Female medical school students expecting a high income want to marry men with equal or higher incomes and status (Townsend, 1989)

- Online ads: Women who offer financial resources or resource acquisition skills are more likely to request these qualities (Weiderman, 1993)

- Singaporean women place much higher value on “social level” than do American women (Li, Valentine, & Patel, 2011)
So...

• On average, as women become more educated and earn more income, their requirements for a mate’s social status and earning power *tend to increase*

• Why? Mate selection criteria may be rooted in evolutionary history:
  – Even though a higher male income may not be necessarily for offspring survival in the modern world, our brains evolved in ancestral times when male provisioning may have been necessary
  – Not *easily* overturned (for example, women prefer men who are taller than themselves)
2) Materialism

• In modern economies, people value and strive for material possessions (Fromm, 1976; Leach, 1993)

• Materialism may compete with other values (Burroughs & Rindfleisch, 2002)

• People who are more materialistic and value financial goals
  – place less value on:
    • affiliative goals (Kasser & Ryan, 1993)
    • relational warmth (Richins & Dawson, 1992)
    • close relationships (Burroughs & Rindfleisch, 2002)
  – have more conflicts with friends and romantic partners (Kasser & Ryan, 2001)
  – have less satisfaction with family life (Nickerson et al., 2003)
The incompatibility of materialism and children

![Diagram showing the relationships between Life Satisfaction, Materialism-based happiness, Attitude toward marriage, and Desire for children.]

\[ \chi^2 = 2.16, p = .34, CFI = 1.00, RMSEA = .01, LL = .00, UL = .02, SRM = .02 \]

Source: Figure 1 from Li, Valentine, & Patel (2011)
So...

- In the modern world, there may be a built-in tradeoff between economic prosperity and procreational success.
3) Life History Theory

- Developed by evolutionary biologists to explain how organisms (including humans) adaptively allocate energy, time, and resources across their lifetime toward different activities (e.g., Charnov, 1993; Daan & Tinbergen, 1997; Low, 2000)

- Primary tradeoff – reproductive vs. somatic effort

- Reproductive effort – intrasexual competition for mates, courtship, copulation, gestation, birth, offspring care

- Somatic effort – maintaining and growing the body/mind; acquiring size, immunity, knowledge, skills; ultimately leading to enhanced future reproduction
Slow versus Fast Life History Strategy

- Fast strategy: invest less in somatic development, reproduce as quickly as possible

- Slow strategy: invest more in somatic development before reproducing

- Species that evolved in harsh and unpredictable environments tend to adopt fast LH strategies

- Species that evolved in harsh but predictable environments tend to adopt slow LH strategies
Individuals’ LH strategy are not necessarily fixed

- A person’s LH strategy may be sensitive to environmental cues (Daan & Tinbergen, 1997; Ellis et al., 2009), including availability of resources during childhood and how safe and predictable the current environment is.

- Griskevicius, Delton, Robertson, & Tybur (2011) – primed people with mortality cues via a NY Times “article” – Dangerous Times Ahead: Life and Death in the 21st Century
In How Many Years Do You Want to Get Married?

In How Many Years Do You Want to Have Your First Child?

Source: Griskevicius, Delton, Robertson, & Tybur (2011)
Further Education/Career (Slower Strategy)

Start Family Sooner (Faster Strategy)

Family Income in Childhood
- Poor
- Middle
- Wealthy

Source: Griskevicius, Delton, Robertson, & Tybur (2011)
So...

- When people who grow up in safe, resource-rich environments face danger/uncertainty, they may react by investing more time and energy in somatic development and delaying marriage and family
Takeaways from 3 lines of research

• Mate selection research – education and advancement may induce women to price themselves out of the marriage market

• Materialism – economic prosperity encourages materialism, which may compete with desires for marriage and family

• Life history theory – greater uncertainty may lead slow LH folks to further delay reproduction
Conclusion

• Policymakers hoping to halt or reverse the trend of extended singlehood may benefit from a consideration of these factors, aided by an understanding of evolutionary social psychology.