



Media Release

What accounts for ultra-low fertility in East Asian countries such as Singapore and how these effects are primarily driven by men

Study led by SMU Postdoctoral researcher examined social status affordance (SSA) as a novel factor underlying cultural variations in marriage and childbearing attitudes

Singapore, 26 March 2018 (Tuesday) – Although economic development is broadly associated with low fertility, countries with a predominantly [East Asian](#) cultural population exhibit the lowest fertility rates in the developed world. But why is this so?

A study led by Singapore Management University (SMU) Postdoctoral Researcher, Dr Jose Yong and his co-authors: Dr [Norman Li](#), School of Social Sciences, SMU; Dr Peter Jonason, School of Social Sciences and Psychology, Western Sydney University, Australia; and Dr Tan Yiwen, Arts and Social Sciences, University of Wollongong, Australia, examined social status affordance (SSA) as a novel factor underlying cultural variations in the motivation to marry and have children.

Entitled ‘*East Asian Low Marriage and birthrates: the role of life history strategy, culture, and social status affordance*’, the research paper was recently published in [Personality and Individual Differences](#).

According to the authors, SSA refers to one’s sense of the ease of “acquiring” social status from the environment. Social status is crucial because it allows people to achieve important goals in life. Indeed, people with higher status are more influential than lower status individuals and are more capable of getting what they want. When the SSA of an environment – a city, a society, a state – is low, resident individuals may perceive social status as scarce and hard to attain. As such, they may feel less capable of achieving important life goals, including marriage and starting a family.

The authors noted that East Asian cultures may have low SSA because of their strong obsession over social status relative to other cultures. The cultural pressure to perform well in school and get high-flying, well-paid jobs can intensify competition for prestigious jobs. As more people flock to these prestigious jobs, they become harder to attain and succeed in. As a result, the social status that can be gained through jobs becomes diminished, resulting in reduced SSA.

To observe whether SSA was indeed responsible for people’s feelings towards marriage and childbearing, the authors presented 124 Singaporean and 119 Australian undergraduate students from four different universities with a list of jobs and asked them to rate how prestigious and well-paid those jobs are—this served as the measure of SSA—and then compared their desire for marriage and children according to differences in those job perceptions.

Key Findings

A few key results were found. First, Singaporeans felt that the overall offering of jobs was less prestigious and less well-paying than Australians did, which reflects that Singaporeans perceived less

SSA compared with Australians. Second, Singaporeans had less desire for marriage and wanted fewer children than Australians. Third, the difference between Singaporeans and Australians in desire for marriage and family was mediated by SSA. In other words, differences in desire for marriage and family was accounted for by differences in Singaporean and Australian perceptions of SSA. Thus, as SSA decreased, people felt less positive about marrying and having children.

The study also interestingly found that these effects of SSA on family and childbearing attitudes were driven primarily by men. The authors suggest that because there are stronger expectations on men than women to earn money and support the family, the poorer job circumstances signalled by low SSA are more likely to affect men's readiness to settle down, whereas women are relatively unaffected.

Dr Yong said, "This research was inspired by a conversation I had with a young man from a Western country. He had a job that would have been typically regarded as low status and low paying in Singapore, but yet he had no qualms about settling down young and was married with children. This led me to ponder whether people's considerations for marrying and having children depend on how sufficient they felt their jobs were in enabling them to start and support a family."

He added, "In this regard, people may differ in their thresholds for sufficiency, and Singaporeans possibly require a higher level of education and job success compared to people from other countries before they feel comfortable enough to settle down. Thus, Singaporeans may be focusing on career and social status first and putting off family goals. In some cases, they may even feel negatively about marriage and family."

Implications and Recommendations for Singapore Society

The study suggests that because Singaporeans have less positive perceptions of the job climate than Australians, Singaporeans correspondingly had less desire for marriage and children, especially Singaporean men. The findings provide insights into Singapore's fertility issues and also draw attention to Singaporeans' less favourable perceptions of job prospects relative to people from other countries. Singaporeans appear to feel more pressure to get well paying, respectable jobs compared to Australians, which can have detrimental downstream effects on family and relationship aspirations.

The authors suggest that changing people's perceptions of work competitiveness, pressure, and prospects in Singapore can help to create a better impression of the country as a conducive place for starting a family. For instance, campaigns that can increase the prestige of lower status jobs can help to close the inequality gap between low and high status jobs, such that people are more willing to consider a broader spectrum of jobs to be acceptable enough for them to take the next step in life. The authors also point out that people may put off marriage because they cannot afford certain things that are increasingly expected in society, such as exorbitant wedding ceremonies, and thus people may do well to avoid abiding by such social norms.

The full article entitled 'East Asian Low Marriage and birth rates: the role of life history strategy, culture, and social status affordance' and curriculum vitae of lead author Dr Jose C. Yong are available upon request.

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Home to over 10,000 students across undergraduate, postgraduate professional and post-graduate research programmes, SMU, is comprised of six schools: School of Accountancy, Lee Kong Chian School of Business, School of Economics, School of Information Systems, School of Law, and School of Social Sciences. SMU offers a wide range of bachelors, masters and PhD degree programmes in the disciplinary areas associated with the six schools, as well as in multidisciplinary combinations of these areas.

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