

Singapore Management University

Institutional Knowledge at Singapore Management University

Perspectives@SMU

Centre for Management Practice

4-2012

Making babies: Getting into the mood for love

Singapore Management University

Follow this and additional works at: <https://ink.library.smu.edu.sg/pers>



Part of the [Family, Life Course, and Society Commons](#), and the [Growth and Development Commons](#)

Citation

Singapore Management University. Making babies: Getting into the mood for love. (2012).

Available at: <https://ink.library.smu.edu.sg/pers/260>

This Journal Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Centre for Management Practice at Institutional Knowledge at Singapore Management University. It has been accepted for inclusion in Perspectives@SMU by an authorized administrator of Institutional Knowledge at Singapore Management University. For more information, please email cherylds@smu.edu.sg.

MAKING BABIES: GETTING INTO THE MOOD FOR LOVE

Published:
22 Apr 2012



The pursuit of a perfect partner by women can be traced back to thousands of years ago when the world was still a society of hunters and gatherers. Back then, men tended to provide the family with meat and protection while women stayed at home to plant crops and take care of junior.

Naturally, women wanted a mate who is taller and stronger than she was because these masculine characteristics signify a better ability of the man to provide for and protect the family. They also wanted a mate with high social status as such men had better access to various resources.

Fast forward to the present day; families do not need to hunt animals for food and women are doing as well as men at the work place. Yet, the subconscious mentality remains that male provision is crucial for offspring survival and thus influences the fairer sex in the mate selection process.

That is, women still look for a mate who is taller than her and with a minimum level of social status.

“What is that minimum level? How is it determined? Some research suggests that this minimum level may be a woman’s own social status or income level,” said SMU’s associate professor of psychology [Norman Li](#) at the inaugural “[Profiles of Excellence](#)” seminar, a lecture series that showcases the works of leading scholars at the university.

In the seminar, Li looks at the low fertility rates in Singapore and discussed the issue from the viewpoints of social and evolutionary psychological research.

Using the socio-cultural view, Li said: “It proposes that women have traditionally been excluded from power and economic resources because these are domains controlled almost purposely by men over thousands of years. So it makes sense from this perspective that women seek economic resources in their long term mates.”

From this line of thought, it should mean that women with high incomes will place less emphasis on a mate's income because they themselves are financially stable. Studies have, however, found that such women place an even greater value on a mate's potential income, said Li.

He explained how this is a reminiscent of human evolutionary history: "Although a higher male income these days may not be necessary for offspring survival... our brains evolve from ancestral times over thousands of years when male provision may have been crucial for offspring survival."

"As women in Singapore become more educated and earn more, their requirement of their mate's social status and income tend to increase, thereby the reducing number of eligible men, at least perceived by them," Li added.



Baby shortage in Singapore

Baby-making has become a national issue in Singapore. The city state's Total Fertility Rate (TFR) has been declining and reached a historic low of 1.15 in 2010 — way lower than the replacement rate of 2.1 in developed countries.

The downward trend has been happening despite almost 30 years of government incentives, such as financial aid and longer maternity leave, to get Singaporeans in the mood for love — and babies.

To encourage couples to have more babies, Singapore's Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong gave his assurance earlier this year that the government will do more to reduce the burdens of parenthood. But he also emphasised that the critical factor now is not more financial incentives but creating the supportive social climate and attitudes that will encourage couples to have more children.

And perhaps one of the attitudes that should be addressed is materialism, which Li listed as a second possible reason influencing fertility rates in modern societies.

“Singapore has been economically very successful over the years and people seem to have more and more purchasing power... We have a society that is, at least to some degree, revolving around consumerist values,” said Li.

While the drive for material possessions “is just what people do” in all modern economies, it might compete with other values that people have,” he said.

Li noted research that shows how people who value financial goals and materialism tend to place less value on relational warmth and close relationships; and that they tend to have more conflicts with friends and romantic partners.

A study he did on the topic showed that people who are satisfied with their lives tend to have a more favourable attitude towards marriage, leading to a greater desire to have children.

In contrast, those who base their happiness on materialism tend to be more dissatisfied with their lives and have a more negative attitude towards marriage, leading to less desire for reproduction.

“So in some ways, materialism may be incompatible with marriage and family... One implication is that if we are able to somewhat temper people’s materialistic values, this may somehow allow a boost to occur in their relational and family goals,” said Li.

For some, the concern about material wealth may not have anything to do with personal indulgence but rather, how comfortable they feel about providing for a child. To examine this mindset, Li looked at the concept of life history theory, which examines how organisms allocate time, energy and resources across a lifetime towards different activities.

The theory says that one of the fundamental choices an individual makes is whether to direct his or her resources to somatic efforts or reproductive efforts. Somatic efforts include activities which enhance the body and mind, such as the accrual of knowledge and skills. Reproductive efforts entail courtship, gestation, child birth and care for offspring.

There are two types of life history strategy. A bias towards somatic efforts (that eventually lead to reproductive efforts) is called a slow life history strategy while a bias towards immediate reproductive efforts is a fast life history strategy.

One factor that influences which strategy a person adopts is the individual’s socio-economic status in his childhood, said Li.

If the person grows up with a low socio-economic status, the harshness and instability of those early years tend to lead them to adopt a faster life history strategy. To this group, slow, deliberate somatic efforts to accrue resources would seem futile if death is imminent.

Those who had a stable and affluent childhood are likely to adopt a slower life history strategy when they face stress in adulthood, preferring to invest their resources in self-development and delay family formation.

Individuals tend to activate their life history strategies - fast strategists reproducing quicker and slow strategists delaying reproduction- when they face uncertainty and stress as adults.

“So if you want to encourage people who grow up in high social economic status to reproduce earlier, this may require having these people feel more secure and less stressed. Of course in the modern world, some of these things are possible and some of these things might be very difficult to achieve,” Li noted.

Wooing the Singapore stock

What does the research say on men's adaption to women's changing expectations, asked one participant at the seminar.

Li joked that the "implication is that we are working a lot harder these days". Turning back to the question, he said while such research has not been conducted, he feels that men are going to strive even harder for social status.

However, not all women are set on marrying up and it may be worthwhile to investigate the psychological factors underlying these women's mate preferences and examine if such factors can be cultivated in the general population, Li suggested.

The efforts to bring back the Singapore stock may be hampered with lesser Singaporeans getting hitched. In 2010, the number of marriages fell to 24,363 — a 6.6 per cent drop from the year before and the first dip since 2003. In the same year, 7,405 couples filed for a divorce — up from 6,904 from just five years ago.

Noting the climbing divorce rates, Li cited research that draw links between not having children and separation.

Couples tend to bond together and work as a team to raise a child, he said. "But if there are no children, then it takes a much more special mindset to remain bonded throughout the years."

Besides the economic incentives that have been rolled out by the government for parents, what more can be done to encourage couples to take the step toward parenthood?

Li said that while economic incentives are processed by individuals at a conscious level to calculate the cost and benefits, the brain is also doing calculations at a subconscious level that people may not necessarily be aware of, producing emotions that can influence them.

"It's at least a good start to begin thinking about which are the actual (underlying) mechanisms that underlie our psychology, why do we feel that we don't want more kids right now, or why do we feel that we really want them... it might lead to solutions or insights that we might not otherwise have if we just look at immediate factors," Li concluded.