



Personal traits, cohabitation, and marriage



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ABSTRACT

This study examines how personal traits affect the likelihood of entering into a cohabitating or marital relationship using a competing risk survival model with cohabitation and marriage as competing outcomes. The data are from Waves 1, 3, and 4 of the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health, a rich dataset with a large sample of young adults ($N = 9835$). A personal traits index is constructed from interviewer-assessed scores on the respondents' physical attractiveness, personality, and grooming. Having a higher score on the personal traits index is associated with a greater hazard of entering into a marital relationship for men and women, but the score does not have a significant influence on entering into a cohabitating relationship. Numerous sensitivity tests support the core findings.

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"The whole is more than the sum of its parts." – Aristotle

1. Introduction

Social scientists often study decisions about marriage and other serious romantic relationships by asking participants to rank the characteristics they value in a mate (Botwin et al., 1997; Buss et al., 2001; Fletcher et al., 1999). According to Shackelford et al. (2005), this literature has identified three primary dimensions across cultures as important characteristics in choosing a partner: attractiveness/health, kindness/warmth, and social status/financial resources.

Mate selection and how individuals sort themselves into marriage and cohabitation have critical implications for the distribution of income and work effort, population growth, as well as the natural development of genetic characteristics over time (Becker, 1973; Lichter et al., 2003). Moreover, union formation might affect individuals' health and well-being as numerous studies find that marriage and cohabitation are linked to better physical and psychological health (Fu and Goldman, 1996) and greater happiness (Diener et al., 2000; Stack and Eshleman, 1998; Coombs, 1991; Myers, 1999; Stutzer and Frey, 2006). Nevertheless, researchers have a limited understanding of the causal mechanism between marriage and

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health. In other words, it is not clear whether healthier and happier individuals are more likely to get married (marriage selection) or marriage has a protective effect on health and happiness (marriage protection) (Fu and Goldman, 1996). Furthermore, several factors that affect mate selection and the likelihood of marriage (e.g., physical attractiveness, education, personality) can have both a direct and indirect effect on individuals' health (Fu and Goldman, 1996). Thus, an important step in understanding the causal relationship between marriage and health is investigating how these health-related variables influence selection into marriage.

Although numerous studies have analyzed the effect of physical appearance or socio-economic status on mate selection, very few studies on marriage have included other personal traits such as personality or grooming.² Focusing on attractiveness and economic resources without accounting for personality characteristics might be misleading. Moreover, analyzing attractiveness without taking into account grooming might lead to spurious results, as grooming might offset the disadvantage of low physical attractiveness in mate selection (Carmalt et al., 2008).

In this paper, we empirically investigate the importance of three personal traits—physical attractiveness, personality, and grooming—in influencing the hazard of entering into a cohabitating or marital relationship among a nationally representative sample of young adults. Much of the literature examining personal traits has focused on physical attractiveness alone or correlates of physical attractiveness such as height and weight. This study improves upon earlier research in several ways. First, we use a greater number of personal traits (personality and grooming, in addition to physical attractiveness) than many previous studies. Our expanded list of personal traits is derived from extended interviewer observations of respondents and not self-reported traits or traits based on photographs of individuals. Second, we consider a richer and more extensive set of socio-economic factors. Third, we use a recent panel dataset with a larger sample than found in previous studies. Finally, we account for cohabitation and marriage as competing events to being single and living without a romantic partner.

2. Background

An extensive evolutionary and social psychology literature has analyzed the characteristics that men and women desire in a long-term mate (Buss, 1985, 1989; Buss and Barnes, 1986; Fletcher, 2002; Swami et al., 2008). This literature has routinely showed that men and women differ in their preferences. Most studies have found that men value physical attractiveness and youth more than women when seeking a partner (Braun and Bryan, 2006; Buss et al., 2001; Fisman et al., 2006; Shackelford et al., 2005; Buunk et al., 2002). Alternatively, women exhibit a preference for strong financial prospects (Hitsch et al., 2010; Regan et al., 2000; Todosijevec et al., 2003).

Two perspectives attempt to explain these gender differences in mate selection: the evolutionary perspective and the social structural perspective (Shoemaker, 2007). Grounded in evolutionary theory and the basic principles of Darwin (1859, 1872), the evolutionary perspective posits that historically successful human mate selection behaviors continue to influence current mate choices. Ancestral men and women have invested different resources in their offspring (Geary et al., 2004). Men have invested more indirect resources such as security, protection, food, and material possessions, while women were required to invest extensive physical resources (Buss and Barnes, 1986). The parental investment model (Trivers, 1972) argues that men and women have evolved mating behaviors to ensure the survival of that species (Shoemaker, 2007). Physical attractiveness and youth are viewed as indicators of a woman's health and reproductive capacity (Gangestad and Scheyd, 2005; Hume and Montgomerie, 2001; Rhodes, 2006; Rhodes et al., 2005). On the other hand, women focus on a man's earning potential, socio-economic status, and related personality traits (e.g., ambition, dominance) as indicators of a potential mate's resource acquisition ability (Bryan et al., 2011).

In contrast, the social structural perspective proposes that gender differences in mate selection stem from the contrasting social roles men and women have historically been assigned (Eagly and Wood, 1999; Todosijevec et al., 2003). Typical male social roles have more power and financial independence than female roles. Men tout these commodities on the mating market (Buss and Barnes, 1986; Eagly and Wood, 1999; Howard et al., 1987). Women, in turn, seek to gain power and access to financial resources in exchange for characteristics that they possess (e.g., physical beauty, fertility).

Numerous studies have analyzed the role of physical attractiveness in mate selection (Harper, 2000; Regan, 1998; Stevens et al., 1990; Braun and Bryan, 2006; Buss et al., 2001; Fisman et al., 2006; Shackelford et al., 2005). As mentioned above, physical attractiveness is often viewed as a reliable indicator of the quality, fertility, or long-term health of a mate (Kanazawa and Kovar, 2004; Reither et al., 2009). Women's physical characteristics preferred by men are indicative of reproductive fitness such as: youth (Symons, 1979), developed breasts (Manning et al., 1997; Møller et al., 1995), lower waist-to-hip ratios (Perilloux et al., 2010; Singh, 1993, 1995), or lower weight (Mukhopadhyay, 2008). On the other hand, women prefer men with physical characteristics that suggest dominance as an indicator of the strength and ability of the men to protect. These include height and the distinctly male V-shaped body type (Braun and Bryan, 2006; Buss and Schmitt, 1993; Dijkstra and Buunk, 2001; Hughes and Gallup, 2002).

Much of the existing literature has relied on relatively small samples or used photographs to assess subjects' physical attractiveness (Braun and Bryan, 2006; Regan, 1998; Stevens et al., 1990). In studies with larger datasets, which rarely

² Carmalt et al. (2008) analyzed romantic pairs data from Wave 3 of Add Health (2810 men and women in married, cohabiting, or dating relationships) to evaluate whether obesity affects having a physically attractive partner. They controlled for personality and grooming in their analysis to see whether these traits offset the penalties associated with obesity. Grooming was positively associated with having a physically attractive partner for men and women, while personality attractiveness was significant only for women.

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