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Height: an Enigmatic Form of Social Inequality

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Height: an enigmatic form of social inequality

by Nicolas Herpin

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Is education becoming more and more egalitarian in Italy? Do children born in working or farming families have now better opportunities to study at universities than their parents? Simone Sarti challenges this classical approach in sociology. Instead of comparing the social origin of university students from successive generations, he takes a short cut. His study focuses only on the longitudinal relationship between height and years of school attendance within the Italian male population.

Why height? Studies about monozygotic twins whose DNA is identical estimate that about 20% of the height variance is explained by social-environmental conditions. At adult age, physical stature is linked with the economic situation of an individual's parents during his childhood, health conditions and quality of food, precocious physical effort, and other environmental factors [Fogel 2004; Herpin 2006]. Data from surveys do not register accurately these handicap factors when they use only the occupation of parents. Thus, height could be used as a synthetic indicator of the observable and non-observable pertinent factors. Height and number of years of education are available from two Italian surveys on several thousands individuals born in the 1930s-1980s timespan. If a decrease of social inequality happened during the second part of the Twentieth century, we should observe a decrease of the longitudinal relationship between height and years of school attendance.

Statistical analysis by Sarti shows that the correlation between height and the level of education is stronger among men of older generations than among those belonging to later generations. The rapid economic growth of Western Europe after the

Second World War and public redistributive policies explain this evolution. Families from poor neighborhoods have now fewer children and more money to feed them. Pregnancies are monitored by doctors. Children do not engage in hard work during the teenage because at that age school is compulsory. So, contrary to what happened to earlier generations, when they reach the adult age, the later cohorts reach the full potentiality of their genetic height. In the past, only the children of the rich had this opportunity. During this period, physical stature is a good proxy for what Sarti calls “embedding disadvantages” among men.

The co-variation of height and education is a longitudinal measure of social inequality for a developing country. It is less and less adequate for countries in which most of the adults have been raised within a middle-class environment. The level of education is less and less related to parent’s social class. The fact that this correlation is becoming weaker does not mean that social inequality is dissolving: rather, it changes its nature according to the economic growth of a country and to hiring policies in its labor market. It does not disappear.

The slow disappearance of the environmental handicap does not have the effect of giving the same physical height to each individual. Since World War Two, the average height of Western European males increased by one centimeter every ten years, but the distribution of height among generations is stable. During this period, height takes a new social meaning. The percentage of individuals coming from working class families is increasing among tall men, while the percentage of individuals coming from middle et upper class families raises among short men. Height is less and less an indication of their past life in their family of origin. It tends to become reliable information on the future and it is used in important decisions making. When all individuals reach their genetic potentiality, height becomes a cultural belief.

Take for example school performance. Short men are more likely to have a low educational degree or not at all [Komlos and Baur 2004; Herpin 2005]. In France, controlling for the occupational status of the father and age, they are more likely to have abandoned school at a low educational level. In school, short boys find it difficult to become popular among their peers; they are not selected for the sporting teams; they are bullied more often than other pupils [Voss and Mulligan 2000]. They tend to quit the school not so much because of their marks but because they are sick of their peers and their behavior.

At work, short men are not more often unemployed than medium or tall; but the shorter the height, the smaller the income. Every inch brings an addition of 789 USD a year [Judge and Cable 2004]. This does not mean that the raise in salary is caused by height alone: tall men have better salaries because they have better careers. In the French sample of the 2001 European Panel, height is positively correlated with

supervisory responsibilities, after controlling the level of diploma, residential area, and age. The roles that tall men have in sports and in their peers groups during their teenage are likely to increase their self-confidence. Moreover, being tall enables one to be heard and obeyed, so that height is used in hiring to leadership position or as promotion criteria. Height is not relevant for all employers in determining who is to be in charge of others. In France, height privilege does not come into play for civil service hierarchy because of the anonymity of written competitions and examinations.

Short men, who work no less hard than taller ones, do not display any combination of traits that would make them more difficult to bear as partners in a couple. In the French survey, they are not more likely than middle or tall men to drink heavily or have an unbalanced diet; nor are they likely to practice sports less often than taller men, so they are no more prone to obesity than them. Tall men smoke more cigarettes per day than short men. In other words, short men are not particularly likely to have life habits that disturb marital or marital-style life. Though short men seem no less fit to have a partner than their taller counterparts, they are, nonetheless, less likely to have one, at least in the French sample. While many do find a spouse, they have to overcome their handicap by compensating for it. This seems a convincing interpretation of short men's patent tardiness in marriage or forming a permanent relationship. Having remained single for a longer time, they have acquired greater maturity when forming a binding relationship. They are older than tall men before they manage to find a mate. Whatever his age, a short man has a better chance of winning a girl if she is much younger than him. Both young and old women, in fact, subscribe to the traditional idea that older men offer guarantee of couple stability [Bozon 1990].

Being short makes it more difficult for a man to find a mate when women follow social conventions with regard to intra-couple height difference. Couples are supposed to be physically "well-matched"; according to this social norm, it is desirable for a man to be taller than his wife, though neither excessively nor insufficiently taller. This is not an exact law. Yet, not following this convention does make way for informal sanctions in everyday life. Couples who are not height-matched are noticed in the street. The effects of this blemish are widely exploited in comic strips and in advertising that runs on humor. As a physical feature, it may well get in the way of a couple's social and friendship aspirations. The couple can be sanctioned throughout its life for not following this social convention.

In France, the average difference between men and women married or forming a permanent relationship is 12 cm ($\sigma = 8$ cm). "Height-matched couples" are defined as those among whom the height difference does not exceed a standard deviation from the mean; i.e., couples for whom the man is between 4 and 20 cm taller than the woman. This social norm is less likely to be followed by blue-collar workers'

and farmers' sons than men of bourgeois or middle-class origin. Young men are also more likely to have a wife or partner who is much shorter (i.e., by more than 20 cm); the height-match tradition is more likely to be perpetuated by older generations, and it is not as closely followed in the Paris region, predictably more cosmopolitan and *avant-garde* than the rest of France in its social mores and lifestyle.

Men of near-average height have a greater choice of forming a "height-matched" couple because they concentrate around central values. Three-fourths of medium-height men are well matched. Short men are more likely than men of medium height to be the object of the attention and mockery that plague ill-matched couples.

Tall men have just as much difficulty to follow the "match" rule. Yet, in the case of height mismatch they do not seem as likely to fall victim to informal sanctions as shorter men. They can escape the sharply discredited situation of being shorter than their spouse. Among tall men there is a strong correlation between matched height and homogamy (which is not found for men of medium height). In fact, there are two types of mismatched couples. The first is the classic figure of female hypergamy: a young woman of modest social background marries a bourgeois' son. The second, more remarkable for our analysis, is when a tall man marries a woman of higher social origin than himself. This seems to indicate that being tall is not only a resource for a man but is also perceived as such by women. Height is a positive asset for such men, facilitating their social ascension through marriage or a marriage-style relationship, either in the name of male "beauty" or a promising career.

Tall men have a higher reproduction rate [Nettle 2002]. Men who beget the highest number of children are 6 feet high (1,82 m). One reason for this high reproduction rate is the fact that tall men have more stable partners. Analyzing a survey of American officers at the end of their career, Mueller and Mazure [2001] show that taller men married twice as much as shorter men.

The process of choosing a mate is changing due to the better education of women and their integration into the job market. They gained power in mating decisions and are less concerned about how reliable a provider their mate is going to be. Relationships between men and women are increasingly egalitarian. Women behave with regard to men just like men behaved with regard to women in earlier generations. For them, height is an indicator of male beauty, and aesthetic values matter. The corollary of this is that, among men, access to the other sex is becoming less "equal" or, at least, is not improving. Short men are in greater danger of being discriminated not only in education and in the job market, but also in mate selection. Shared beliefs become cultural constraints. The idea that couples should be physically matched and the equation between height and beauty are examples. As a nexus of cultural forces, height contributes to social inequality.

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Abstract: Statistical analysis by Sarti shows that the correlation between height and the level of education is stronger among men of older generations than among recent ones. Is education among men becoming more egalitarian? That would be true if height had the same social meaning at each generation.

Since the Second World War, the average height increases by one centimeter every ten years among men in Western Europe; but the distribution of heights among generations is stable. Among tall men, the proportion of individuals coming from the working class families is increasing and among the short men, it is the proportion of individuals coming from middle and upper class families. Height is less and less an information about the family of origin.

When all individuals reach their genetic potentiality, height takes a new meaning for important decision making processes. Short men are in greater danger of being discriminated against in education and in job market but also in mate selection. When shared, beliefs are cultural constraints. As a nexus of cultural forces, height contributes to social inequalities among men.

Keywords: height, education, inequality, couple, leadership

Nicolas Herpin is Senior Research Fellow Emeritus at National Center of Scientific Research (France). He teaches sociology at Sciences-po Paris and works at the National Institute of Statistics and Economic Studies (France). He is author of *Sociology of consumption* (2004), and *Consumption and ways of life in France* (2008) with an economist, Daniel Verger. His present research interest have a particular focus on social inequalities surrounding physical appearance, like clothes and height.