

## Preferred Mate Characteristics in Young Adults

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The possible sex difference in preferred mate characteristics is a domain that is receiving more attention as of late, due to the increases in new forms of dating and new conceptualizations of attraction. Evolutionary theory posits that men are attracted to cues signaling reproductive value and women are attracted to resources and personality traits, while more social-based theories rely on societal pressures explaining the way men and women behave when it comes to attraction. The present study found that men and women may not differ in terms of how important they rate general physical attractiveness and shared values. However, women did value long-term relationships more and monetary potential more, while men rated characteristics like eye color, hair color, and weight as more important. Further, relationship longevity was only predicted partially by certain aspects of real-life relationships, but not ideal mate preferences. These findings suggest that a simple evolutionary approach to mate preferences research may not be completely sufficient in today's society.

*Keywords:* attraction, relationships, dating, evolution, mate preferences

The literature on young-adult mate preferences and relationships is extensive, yet many of the reported findings are contradictory and inconclusive. This study was designed to provide additional information regarding several issues of interest to relationship researchers, including the correlation between expressed preferences and demonstrated preferences; sex differences in preferred mate characteristics; and factors associated with relationship duration in young adults.

Recent research on expressed preferences and demonstrated preferences has yielded inconclusive results. For example, Eastwick, Finkel, and Eagly (2011), compared self-reported mate preferences with preferences demonstrated in live-interaction situations and found significant differences. In contrast, Burris, Welling, and Puts (2011) found that women who express a preference for more masculine faces tend to have more masculine partners. Methodological differences between the studies make it difficult to draw definitive conclusions about the correlation between expressed and demonstrated mate preferences. Research on attractiveness tends to focus on initial attraction. In relationship research, though, changes in ratings of attractiveness are also of interest. Reis et al. (2011) found that simply spending more time with someone in a live-interaction can make that person seem more attractive.

The traditional view of sex differences in mate preferences is that men tend to value traits signaling physical attractiveness and reproductive capacities, and women tend to value traits signaling stability and resource acquisition (Buss, 1989; Li & Kenrick, 2006; Li et al., 2013; Sprecher, Sullivan, & Hatfield, 1994). Much of the theory in this area stems the work of Trivers (1972), who argues that women invest more in parenting and are therefore more discriminating in mate selection. Men, who traditionally carry less of the responsibility of having and

raising a child, are less selective. From an evolutionary perspective, the cost of wasting one's reproductive resources is less for men than it is for women. Women are thought of as the choosier sex because they can spread their genes to the next generation best by securing resources over the 9 months of pregnancy. Men, however, may be better suited pursuing other sexual partners in that time, in order to enhance their chances of progeny in the next generation (Trivers, 1972; Feingold, 1992; Bjorklund & Shackelford, 1999).

Just as sex differences in mating preferences have been interpreted from an evolutionary perspective, so have sex differences in relationships. This could be thought of as the difference between relationship preferences and pursuit, and actual relationship maintenance once in a committed relationship. Some relationships are found to involve jealousy induction, an intentional tactic used to make a romantic partner jealous. This type of behavior is typically correlated with lower relationship satisfaction and commitment (Mattingly, Whitson, & Mattingly, 2012). Other relationships are potentially volatile because of too much jealousy in particular domains. Many studies have shown that men are more distressed by potential sexual infidelities, while women are more distressed by potential emotional infidelities (Buss, Larsen, Westen & Semmelroth, 1992; Edlund & Sagarin, 2009; Sagarin, Becker, Guadagno, Wilkinson, & Nicastle, 2012). In comparison to men, women have been found to show heightened jealousy in romantic relationships. Sagarin and Guadagno (2004), for example, found that women more often than men report "extreme jealousy". These studies lend support to evolutionary models of human mating behavior.

As would be expected from an evolutionary perspective, meta-analytic work has shown that women prefer taller partners, or partners who are at least as tall as

they are (Pierce, 1996). This result is consistent with the finding that taller men have more attractive girlfriends (Feingold, 1982). In general, the traditional evolutionary hypotheses regarding the importance of physical attractiveness to men, and the importance of earning capacity to women, have been supported by the relevant research in the field (Eastwick & Finkel, 2008; Jonason, 2009). However, it is less clear whether these basic differences in preferences hold true in real-life dating situations. However, research in the same area has shown that initial preferences do not inspire the desire for romantic partners in actual speed dating contexts (Eastwick & Finkel, 2008)

Additionally, some researchers have suggested that gender-specific mate preferences may be at least partially due to socially constructed views of men and women (Wood & Eagly, 2002). A study conducted by Stanik and Ellsworth (2010) found that in environments where women could acquire advanced education, women were more likely to engage in short-term relationships, less likely to desire men with high wealth and status, and less likely to promote traditional gender roles. Women may be less likely to depend on the support of a long-term romantic partner, then, if they are able to provide for themselves and create stability through their own lifestyles and career choices.

Another challenge to evolutionary hypotheses comes from the work of Thompson and O'Sullivan (2012). Thompson and O'Sullivan used an implicit association test, rather than self-report data, to study mate preferences in college students. Both men and women were more likely to associate the pleasant condition with romantic images as opposed to sexual images. There was a gender difference, however, in that the association between romantic images and the pleasant condition was greater for women than it was for men

Some characteristics are desired by both men and women. In a 2013 report, which included an analysis of research from 1939 through 2011, Henry, Helm Jr., and Cruz concluded that both sexes place a high value on a mate's dependable character, pleasing disposition, and emotional maturity. Although this comprehensive report found similarities between men and women, it also found the traditional sex differences. The importance of physical attractiveness to men and the importance of earning capacity to women seem to be fairly robust findings.

### The Present Study

The present study examined sex differences in mate preferences and the relations between ideal and real mate characteristics. An additional goal of the study was to identify factors that predict relationship longevity.

Based on previous research on mate preferences (Buss, 1989; Eastwick & Finkel, 2008; Henry, Helm & Cruz, 2013; Jonason, 2009), we hypothesized that men would focus on characteristics signaling physical attractiveness

and reproductive value more than women would, and that women would focus on personality variables and earning potential more than men. We expected that ideal mate preferences would differ from the characteristics of real romantic partners, though published reports on this point have been contradictory (Burris, Welling, & Puts, 2011; Eastwick, Finkel, & Eagly, 2011). We further hypothesized that personality and relationship variables would better predict relationship length than physical characteristics would, and that real partner characteristics would better predict relationship length than ideal mate preferences would.

## Method

### Participants

Our sample consisted of 127 young adults (99 women; 28 men) between the ages of 18 and 36 ( $M = 19.54$ ,  $SD = 1.99$ ), who were recruited on a university campus and through social media. For some reason, females seemed more drawn to our study than men. In the future, we would like to gather more data on a more balanced sample. Some students received extra credit for their participation, but there was no monetary compensation. Based on self-report data, the sample was 88% Caucasian, 4% African American, 4% Hispanic/Latino, 2% Asian, and 2% "other." Most of the participants expected to get married (90%).

### Materials and Procedure

A three-part questionnaire was designed and administered through Survey Monkey. In Part 1, data were collected on the number of past relationships an individual had; the length of the participant's longest relationship; and demographic variables such as age, sex and ethnicity.

Part 2 included 11 questions about preferred characteristics in an ideal potential mate, and asked participants to rate the importance of each characteristic on a five-point scale. Part 3 included a similar set of 11 questions about characteristics in a mate, but rather than referencing an ideal potential mate, Part 3 referenced the characteristics of an actual romantic partner, specifically the partner with whom the participant had the longest relationship. The questions in Part 3 asked participants to use a five-point scale and rate the degree to which each statement applied to their actual partner. The 11 questions in Parts 2 and 3 assessed preferences for (Part 2) or actual ratings of (Part 3) a romantic partner in terms of physical attractiveness, shared values, potential for monetary success, popularity, family dynamics, shared activities and interests, hair or eye color, height, weight, number of previous relationships, and masculinity or femininity. All questions were carefully created after deliberating about what preferences would be most important to ask men and women about. Although these questions were not pulled from previously validated measures, we believe they tapped into many of the basic aspects of initial attraction

and relationship maintenance. Future research needs to be done to validate individual items, determine factor structures, and ensure internal consistency.

### Results and Discussion

We used IBM SPSS Statistics 19 to analyze the data, with primary analyses focused on sex differences in preferred mate characteristics and factors that contribute to relationship length. Participants' longest romantic relationships ranged in length from less than one month to 69 months ( $M = 19.56$ ,  $SD = 14.31$ ).

A major hypothesis of the present study was that men would rate physical attractiveness as more important than women would. In contrast to the findings of previous research, we found no significant sex difference for the value of general physical attractiveness between men ( $M = 4.21$ ,  $SD = .13$ ) and women ( $M = 4.01$ ,  $SD = .81$ ),  $t(125) = -1.21$ ,  $p = .229$ . However, there were sex differences in ratings for specific physical characteristics. Men were more likely than women to value a potential partner's weight ( $M = 3.68$ ,  $SD = .98$ ;  $M = 3.14$ ,  $SD = 1.03$ ; for men and women, respectively;  $t(125) = -2.460$ ,  $p = .015$ ). Men were also more likely than women to value a potential partner's eye or hair color ( $M = 2.18$ ,  $SD = 1.02$ ;  $M = 1.75$ ,  $SD = .84$ ; for men and women, respectively;  $t(125) = -2.289$ ,  $p = .024$ ). In contrast to men, women placed more importance on a potential partner's height ( $M = 3.29$ ,  $SD = 1.09$ ;  $M = 2.54$ ,  $SD = .92$ ; for women and men, respectively;  $t(125) = 3.349$ ,  $p = .01$ ), a finding that is consistent with previous work (Pierce, 1996).

As hypothesized, women valued a potential partner's earning power more than men did ( $M = 3.00$ ,  $SD = .77$ ;  $M = 2.60$ ,  $SD = .92$ ; for women and men, respectively;  $t(125) = 2.285$ ,  $p = .024$ ). Women were also more likely than men to place importance on long-term relationships ( $M = 4.34$ ,  $SD = .86$ ;  $M = 3.89$ ,  $SD = .92$ ; for women and men, respectively;  $t(125) = 2.415$ ,  $p = .017$ ) and the number of previous partners a potential mate had ( $M = 2.45$ ,  $SD = .95$ ;  $M = 1.75$ ,  $SD = .75$ ; for women and men, respectively;  $t(125) = 3.612$ ,  $p < .001$ ). None of the other ideal mate characteristics showed significant sex differences (see Table 1 for information on all  $t$ -tests). The importance of shared values did not differ between the sexes ( $M = 4.38$ ,  $SD = .74$ ;  $M = 4.11$ ,  $SD = .96$ ; for women and men respectively;  $t(125) = 1.635$ ,  $p = .104$ ). The importance of popularity did not differ between the sexes ( $M = 2.14$ ,  $SD = .80$ ;  $M = 2.04$ ,  $SD = .83$ ; for men and women respectively;  $t(125) = -.580$ ,  $p = .563$ ). The importance of shared activities did not differ between the sexes ( $M = 4.26$ ,  $SD = .69$ ;  $M = 4.10$ ,  $SD = .79$ ; for women and men respectively;  $t(125) = 1.016$ ,  $p = .311$ ). The importance of family dynamics did not differ between the sexes ( $M = 4.16$ ,  $SD = .90$ ,  $M = 3.96$ ,  $SD = 1.0$ ; for women and men respectively;  $t(125) = .999$ ,  $p = .320$ ). The importance of masculine and feminine qualities did not differ between the sexes ( $M =$

$2.97$ ,  $SD = 1.12$ ;  $M = 2.92$ ,  $SD = 1.21$ ; for women and men respectively;  $t(125) = .209$ ,  $p = .835$ ).

Table 1

$t$ -tests for all significant and non-significant sex differences

Variable	$t$	$p$
Importance of physical attractiveness	-1.210	.229
Importance of long term relationships	2.415	.017*
Importance of shared values	1.635	.104
Importance of earning potential	2.285	.024*
Importance of shared activities	1.016	.311
Importance of hair and eye color	-2.289	.024*
Importance of family dynamics	0.999	.320
Importance of height	3.349	.001*
Importance of weight	-2.460	.015
Importance of masculine and feminine characteristics	0.209	.835
Importance of previous relationships	3.612	<.001*

Note.  $p$  values marked with an \* are statistically significant.

Ideal mate preferences correlated with real partner ratings, with the following exception. Ratings for number of previous relationships of ideal partners did not correlate with ratings for number of previous relationships of real partners. In other words, expressed preferences tended to match ratings for real romantic partners. This was true for all characteristics except number of previous relationships (see Table 2).

Linear regression analyses were run with each of the ideal preferences variables regressed against the dependent variable of relationship length, but none proved significant. Furthermore, age and number of relationships failed to significantly predict relationship length. Relationship length was predicted, however, by three of the real-life relationship variables. First, participants who rated their previous partner as someone who shared their values had longer-lasting relationships,  $\beta = 3.27$ ,  $p = .012$ . Shared values explained a significant proportion of variance in relationship length,  $F(1,126) = 6.568$ ,  $p = .012$ ,  $R^2 = .050$ ,  $R = .223$ ; an increase of one point on the shared-values rating scale was associated with an additional 3.27 months.

## PREFERRED MATE CHARACTERISTICS

Table 2

Correlations between ideal preference variables and what participants actually pursued in partners

Correlation	<i>r</i>	<i>p</i>
Importance of physical attractiveness and Physical attractiveness	.201	.023*
Importance of shared values and Shared values	.445	<.001*
Importance of earning potential and Earning potential	.293	.001*
Importance of popularity and Popularity	.217	.014*
Importance of family dynamics and Family dynamics	.185	.037*
Importance of shared activities and Shared activities	.302	.001*
Importance of hair and eye color and Hair and eye color	.298	.001*
Importance of height and Height	.249	.005*
Importance of weight and Weight	.342	<.001*
Importance of masculine and feminine characteristics and Masculine and feminine characteristics	.331	<.001*
Importance of previous relationships and Previous relationships	.112	.206

Note. *p* values marked with an \* are statistically significant.

Secondly, participants who rated their previous partner's family dynamics positively had longer relationships,  $\beta = 2.68$ ,  $p = .008$ . Quality family dynamics also explained a significant portion of the variance in relationship length,  $F(1,126) = 7.335$ ,  $p < .01$ ,  $R^2 = .055$ ,  $R = .235$ ; an increase of one point on the family-dynamics rating scale was associated with an additional 2.68 months. Finally, participants who viewed their previous partner as having had an appropriate number of relationships had longer relationships,  $\beta = 2.24$ ,  $p = .014$ . Partners having an appropriate number of previous relationships also explained a significant portion of the variance in relationship length,  $F(1,126) = 6.188$ ,  $p = .014$ ,  $R^2 = .047$ ,  $R = .217$ ; an increase of one point on the number-of-relationships rating scale was associated with an additional

2.24 months. We conclude, then, that relationship longevity is predicted by real rather than ideal ratings, and it is predicted by relationship variables rather than physical characteristics. Average relationship length for this population was 19.56 months, so an increase of 2-4 months is actually a significant change, especially when considering the unstable nature of college romantic relationships.

Long-lasting relationships are associated with shared values, desirable family dynamics, and an acceptable number of previous relationships.

### Conclusion

This study adds to the growing body of literature on attraction and relationships. Although evolutionary theory has guided much of the research in the area, other perspectives, especially social-based theories, should also be considered. Our data provided only partial support for evolutionary hypotheses of sex differences in mate preferences. We contend that both biological and social factors influence mate choice, and that both types of factors contribute to the success of a romantic relationship. In our study, physical characteristics were important in mate selection, but they were not significant factors contributing to relationship duration. One interpretation of our findings is that there is a shift in the relative importance of biological and social factors during a relationship, with biological factors decreasing in importance and social factors increasing in importance. This may be due to the fact that physical characteristics may be important for breeding physical attraction and bringing people together, but they may be relatively meaningless for predicting long-term interpersonal satisfaction, where compatibility matters most.

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