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Sex Differences in Mate Preferences

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Abstract

This study was designed to examine the sex differences in preferred mate characteristics in the long term among Psyc2013 students. The questionnaires asked participants to rank the characteristics on their desirability in someone they might like to 'be with in a committed relationship and have children' (Long term strategy), and the other asked participants to rank the characteristics on their desirability in someone they might like to 'date' (Short term strategy). The order of these questionnaires was counterbalanced but only the long term rankings were analysed for the purposes of this study. The sex of the participant was the lone predictor of the importance placed on the mate characteristics. As predicted, the sexes differ in their preferences of mate characteristics. The results indicated that the sexes influence some of the preferences.

Introduction and Research Hypotheses

Erik Erikson once stated that, "One could make a point for an evolutionary rationale which would explain why sexual differences in mate preferences should not fully divide the sexes until competence and fidelity permit their division to be one of polarization, that is, one of mutual enhancement of experience and of distribution of labor within a stylized pattern of love and care. Such a rationale of human development would also suggest that the sexes are less different in regard to the capacities and virtues which further communication and cooperation; while the differences are greatest where divergence is of the essence, that is, in the counterpoints of love life and the divided functions of procreation (Erikson, 1954; p.129).

This quote from Erik Erikson suggests that he recognized that sex plays important roles in many areas of life including mating preferences, and that at the level of mating preferences, this factor most likely to function independently. Other social psychologists and sociologists

have also dedicated much time to studying the characteristics that people prefer in romantic partners and mates (Buss & Barnes, 1986). Survey research on this topic shows important commonalities in the characteristics preferred by men and women, also demonstrating consistencies across cultures and over historical time in many of the characteristics sought in mates (Buss & Schmitt, 1993).

Both evolutionary and social-cultural theories have been offered as explanations for sex differences in mate preferences (Eagly & Wood, 1999). Evolutionary theorists frequently use sexual selection theory as a central framework for analyzing the origins of sex differences in mating strategies (Gangstead et al., 2006). According to this theory, men tend to invest less in offspring, both biologically and behaviorally, than women do. Furthermore, men can potentially father many offspring, whereas women can give birth only to relatively few offspring. As a result, men have evolved more of a “quantity” strategy in mating and reproduction, whereas women have evolved more of a “quality” strategy. Men tend to be more interested in casual sex than women are, they are less committed in their sexual attitudes and behavior, and they are particularly attracted to mates who are young and attractive — i.e., mates who give honest signs of fertility and who show good long term prospects as bearers and rearers of children. In contrast, women have evolved to be more selective in choosing mates (both in terms of mates’ behavioral traits and mates’ genetic endowment), to be less interested in sex for sex’s sake, and to choose mates who can guarantee that women’s relatively few offspring are protected, provisioned for, and cared for in the long run. Thus, according to sexual selection theory, women have evolved to seek out men who have status, resources, and who display commitment to their mating partners.

Social structural theories have also been used to explain sex differences in the traits preferred in mates. Buss and Barnes (1986) proposed a “structural powerlessness hypothesis” — that in many societies women’s primary route to material resources was through marriage, and thus to be materially successful women needed to select mates based on resources more than men did. A corollary of this hypothesis is that as gender roles change and as women gain economic equality with men, they may come to focus less on a mate’s resources and status, and more on relationship “luxuries,” such as a mate’s kindness, honesty, and a sense of humor.

This study presents another finding on the variations in the characteristics among men and women preference in mates. The first hypothesis is that sex differences differ in the partner trait preferences of participants in the survey. The second hypothesis is that sex is important in organizing partner trait preferences. Then, in an attempt to identify the significance levels for the independent samples, two-tailed t-test analysis is used.

Method

Participants

A total of 550 Psyc2013 students participated in this study. For the purposes of this study, the analysis focussed on participants in the long term condition only. This sample comprised of 174 females (M age = 21.84, SD = 5.85) and 81 males (M age = 21.26, SD = 5.70) with 45.1% of participants currently in a relationship (M length = 16.41 months, SD = 29.97 months). With regard to relationship preference, 14.5% reported that they liked being single, 11% reported that they would like to date for short periods of time, and 74.5% reported that they would like to be in a long term committed relationship. Interestingly, these sample characteristics were very similar to participants in the short term condition.

Materials and Procedure

Participants completed two questionnaires that concerned their preferred characteristics in a potential mate. Each questionnaire contained 13 characteristics that participants were asked

to rank in order from 1 = most preferred to 13 = least preferred. The instructions for each questionnaire differed: one asked participants to rank the characteristics on their desirability in someone you might like to 'be with in a committed relationship and have children' (Long term strategy), and the other asked participants to rank the characteristics on their desirability in someone you might like to 'date' (Short term strategy). The order of these questionnaires was counterbalanced. Then, only long term rankings were analysed for the purposes of this study.

Results

Sex Differences

Table 1 shows the means and standard deviations within each sex, two-tailed t-test comparisons between the sexes, and effect sizes in the d (standardized difference) matrix for the thirteen characteristics that assessed mate preferences in the long term.

Following Buss (1989), a compilation of characteristics (e.g., religious, exciting personality) of a potential mate was administered to the participants who were instructed to rank in order from 1 = most preferred to 13 = least preferred. A total of thirteen aspects of mating preferences were examined: (1) Kind/Understanding, (2) Intelligent, (3) Exciting personality, (4) Easygoing, (5) Physically attractive, (6) Healthy, (7) Creative, (8) Wants children, (9) Good earning capacity, (10) College graduate, (11) Good heredity, (12) Good Housekeeper, and (13) Religious. These characteristics are listed as to the consensual rank for the male and female sample as a whole.

An examination of the mean revealed that for both sexes, kind/understanding characteristic was the most preferred and was highest among females. Then intelligence followed as the second most preferred characteristic for both sexes. The sexes differ in the third to ninth and eleventh to thirteenth preferences. These are the following preferences: Exciting Personality, Easygoing, Physical Attractiveness, Healthy, Creative, Wants Children, Good

Earning Capacity, Good Heredity and Good Housekeeper respectively. Other results worth noting are that male rank physical attractiveness and good heredity higher than females while females rank exciting personality, healthy, wants children, good earning capacity, good housekeeper and religious slightly higher than males. In addition, male rank religious as the last preference, while female rank heredity as their least preferred characteristic.

To test the significance of the difference between the men's and women's preferences, a two-tailed *t* statistics was calculated. Results showed negative *t* values. This analysis suggests that the associations between male and female are not attributable to mate preferences.

Table 1: Sex differences in preferred mate characteristics in the long term

Characteristics	Male (<i>n</i> = 81)		Female (<i>n</i> = 174)		<i>t</i> (253)	<i>d</i>
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>		
<i>Long Term</i>						
Kind/Understanding	3.20 (1)	2.68	2.61 (1)	2.11	1.88	.061
Intelligent	3.62 (2)	2.86	3.96 (2)	2.37	-.937	.316
Exciting personality	4.41 (5)	3.07	5.01 (3)	3.49	-1.32	.188
Easygoing	4.31 (4)	3.27	5.16 (4)	3.23	-1.95	.052
Physically attractive	4.21 (3)	2.76	6.23 (6)	3.05	-5.07	.001
Healthy	4.67 (6)	2.83	5.39 (5)	2.92	2.10	.036
Creative	6.51 (7)	3.72	7.79 (9)	3.34	-2.76	.006
Wants children	6.56 (8)	3.93	7.07 (7)	3.61	-1.04	.300
Good earning capacity	8.19 (9)	3.62	7.60 (8)	3.08	1.36	.176
College graduate	8.25 (10)	2.66	8.55 (10)	3.12	-.690	.491
Good heredity	8.43 (11)	3.71	9.45 (13)	2.90	-1.86	.064

Good housekeeper	9.30 (12)	3.81	9.37 (11)	3.07	-.173	.863
Religious	10.38 (13)	4.48	10.70 (12)	3.69	-.599	.550

Note. () refers to the consensual rank for the male and female sample as a whole; significance levels for the independent samples t-test analysis are two-tailed.

Discussion

This study was designed to examine the sex differences in preferred mate characteristics in the long term relationship among Psyc2013 students. Specifically, to find out whether male and female have significant difference in their preferences. As expected, these data replicated well-known sex differences in mate preferences: Females placed greater importance on financial prospects in a mate, while males placed greater importance on good housekeeper in a mate.

At the participant level of analysis, these data confirmed the researchers' predictions about the relationship between sexes and mate preferences. First, the positive t values of the three characteristics: kind/understanding, healthy, and good earning capacity mean that the two sexes preferences differ in these characteristics. In other words, there is a positive correlation for these three characteristics. Second, ten among the thirteen characteristics showed positive t -values which are Intelligent, Exciting Personality, Easygoing, Physically Attractive, Creative, Wants Children, College Graduate, Good Heredity, Good Housekeeper, and Religious. This means that there is a negative correlation or no significant difference among the preferences of the two sexes for these ten characteristics. Hence these ten characteristics were the same for female and female, but female and male slightly differed in the relative importance assigned to specific characteristics. Males ranked physical attractiveness higher than women did, whereas females ranked a number of characteristics — Exciting Personality, Healthy, Wants Children, Good Earning Capacity, and Religious higher than men.

Finally, it should be noted that for the characteristics surveyed the result was fairly weak: sex differences were not linked to mate preferences. This confirms Eagly and Wood's (2004)

findings that across nations, gender empowerment were associated with smaller sex differences in participants' emphasis on earning capacity and domestic skills as criteria in mate selection, and other characteristics.

References

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Appendix A.

Demographic Questions

1. Age: _____(years)
2. Sex: Male/Female _____
3. Are you in a relationship? Yes/No _____
4. If 'Yes', how long have you been in this relationship (in months)? _____
5. Please tick the box which BEST describes you
 - I would like to be single and not date
 - I would like date lots of different people for short periods
 - I would like to be with one person in a committed long term relationship

Condition L (Long term)

Below is a set of characteristics that might be present in a potential mate. Please rank them on their desirability in someone you might like to be with in a committed relationship and have children. Give

a '1' to the **most desirable** characteristics in a potential mate;

a '2' to the **second most** desirable characteristic;

a '3' to the **third most** desirable characteristic; and so on down to 13 for the **13th most** desired characteristic in a potential mate.

Condition S (Short term)

Below is a set of characteristics that might be present in a potential mate. Please rank them on their desirability in someone you might like to date. Give

a '1' to the **most desirable** characteristics in a potential mate;

a '2' to the **second most** desirable characteristic;

a '3' to the **third most** desirable characteristic; and so on down to 13 for the **13th most** desired characteristic in a potential mate.

kind and understanding, religious, exciting personality, creative and artistic, good housekeeper, intelligent, good earning capacity, wants children, easy-going, good heredity, college graduate, physically attractive, healthy.