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Women's Mate Preferences

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Synonyms

Female mate interests; Female partner preferences; Women's mate interests; Women's preferred partners

Definition

The qualities that women are interested in when selecting partner's for short- or long-term relationships.

Female Mate Preferences

Introduction

Within evolutionary psychology, the study of women's mate preferences is a central and important topic. This chapter will discuss the general strategies that women tend to use when looking for a mate. Following this, there will be an overview of what is known about female mate preferences, focusing on three major features known to be most important in women's mate preferences: a man's face, his body, and his behavior. The chapter will conclude by covering several contextual

factors that can cause women's mate preferences to shift in predictable ways.

Mating Strategies

In almost all species, including mammals, males and females differ in how much they invest in their offspring in terms of time, resources, and energy. The ultimate evolutionary force is maximizing the number of offspring that live to reproduce and extend an individual's genes into future generations. According to Parental Investment theory (Trivers 1972), the sex that makes greater initial investments in offspring ought to be the "choosier" sex when it comes to mate preferences and mate standards. In humans, females must make larger initial investments in offspring than men because females gestate, lactate, and provide most of the basic care of infants at the beginning of their lives.

Many studies have documented differences between men and women in their general mating strategies, usually consistent with parental investment theory. Women, for example, tend to have lower sex drive than most men, they desire fewer sexual partners and want longer-term relationships, and they are more likely to regret past sexual encounters. This is consistent with the notion that women – because they invest more in offspring – are choosier about when and with whom to have sex, and they value partners who will be committed to them and their children. These presumably evolved differences in mating strategies should also affect the types of mates that

women prefer. Across 37 cultures, Buss (1989) found that women favor men who are more capable of acquiring resources (e.g., larger amounts of money, higher social status) presumably because such men can better provide for offspring, increasing the likelihood that offspring will survive to reproductive age. These effects, however, also depend on the roles of women in relation to men within a given culture. Eagly and Wood (1999) reanalyzed the 37 cultures data and found that these sex differences are smaller in societies that have more egalitarian views of men and women and when women hold greater social, economic, and/or political power in a society.

Women also prefer mates who want longer-term commitments, most likely because such men are more able and willing to provide long-term resources for their children. However, there is considerable variation within women in these and other mate preferences. According to Gangestad and Simpson (2000), women evaluate potential mates on two basic dimensions: (1) a man's resources and ability to be a good long-term provider and (2) evidence of him having "good genes" (signaled by his health, attractiveness, and related cues), which could be passed on to offspring. There will now be a discussion of the mate qualities women should have evolved to prefer in a man's face, body, and behavior, as well as the contextual factors that tend to alter what most women prefer in mates.

The Face

Three aspects of the face are believed to signal the quality of a man's physical condition or his "good genes": symmetry, averageness, and sexually dimorphic features. Humans tend to be bilaterally symmetric, with the left and right sides of their bodies being similar in size and proportion. If, however, individuals encounter disturbances during development (e.g., they have deleterious genetic mutations or are exposed to environmental toxins or pathogens), their bodies become somewhat asymmetrical as they grow. Greater facial and body symmetry, therefore, should be viewed as more attractive because greater symmetry indicates that an individual has withstood these

disturbances better than others across development.

Facial averageness is also perceived as attractive in mates, because it is another possible marker of good genes. Average facial features tend to reflect the normal (nondeleterious) genes that exist in a population. Thus, the more a face differs from the population average, the more a person is likely to possess genetic mutations or other defects that might impair his or her successful reproduction.

Sexually dimorphic features are physical qualities that evolved differently between the sexes. Men, for example, have more facial hair, more prominent brow ridges, and are more muscular than women, on average. Sexually dimorphic traits are indicative of a man's level of testosterone and, therefore, his ability to attain and maintain social status and be a good resource provider. Now there will be a review of studies that have examined how women view these theoretically relevant facial features when evaluating men as potential mates.

Facial Symmetry

Facial symmetry is a quality that is attractive in both men and women, and it is believed to be an indicator of overall health. Indeed, greater facial symmetry in men tends to be associated with greater social dominance and better reproductive health as well as more facial averageness and more sexually dimorphic (masculine) features (e.g., Fink et al. 2001; Van Dongen and Gangestad 2011). Swaddle and Cuthill (1995), however, found that if the mean size of certain facial features was held constant, the connection between greater facial symmetry and higher rated facial attractiveness was eliminated, suggesting that the average size of certain facial features may partially explain why symmetrical faces tend to be more attractive.

Facial Averageness

The first evidence suggesting the greater attractiveness of average faces came from computer simulations in which faces were morphed together to create composite faces. As the number of faces in a composite increased, so did their perceived

attractiveness (Langlois and Roggman 1990). Morphed faces are usually rated as more attractive than virtually all of the individual faces used to create a composite (Rhodes et al. 2001). Although average male faces are viewed as slightly less masculine than distinct faces, they are perceived to be healthier and may be an honest signal of health quality.

Sexually Dimorphic Features

A large amount of research has investigated the attractiveness of sexually dimorphic (more masculine) characteristics of male faces, which include a longer lower face, more facial hair, and more prominent brow ridges and cheekbones. Greater facial masculinity is known to be associated with higher testosterone levels (Penton-Voak and Chen 2004). Along with facial averageness and symmetry, more sexually dimorphic facial features increase how healthy women perceive men to be and how healthy they actually are (Thornhill and Gangestad 2008). There is debate, however, about whether and when masculine faces are preferred in mates. Some studies have found that men who have more feminine faces are preferred in certain mating contexts. These findings may be attributable to either the specific features of the face being manipulated or the morphing techniques used. In addition, as highlighted later, preferences for more masculine features tend to fluctuate with changes in the environment, especially where a woman is in her menstrual cycle.

Facial hair is another sexually dimorphic trait that affects female mate preferences. Neave and Shields (2008) had women rate men who had no beard, a light stubble, or a full beard and found that as beard length increased, so did the male's perceived dominance and aggression. Women were most attracted to an intermediate beard length (a light stubble), at least in younger men.

The Body

A man's body also provides cues to the quality of his genes and/or his status within a society. Female preferences for different features of male bodies may have been shaped by selection pressures, leading women to value certain attributes.

Similar to beard length, intermediate levels of muscularity are most attractive to women, on average (Frederick and Haselton 2007). Moderate muscularity tends to signal better health, whereas too much muscularity is costly to both develop and maintain, hindering health. Other important body features are the width of a man's shoulders relative to his hips and height. Women typically prefer men who have a higher shoulder-to-hip ratio, and such men have more sex partners and engage in first sex at an earlier age (Hughes and Gallup 2003).

Women are also attracted to men who are taller. Fink et al. (2007) investigated how the ideal height of a partner shifts based on a person's own height and found that relative height was more important to attractiveness than total height. That is, women who are shorter than average find slightly shorter men (who are still taller than them) more attractive. One explanation for this preference is that height may be a cue to a mate's status in society. Indeed, if a man is taller, he is more likely to have more wealth and resources.

Another cue that women consider is the quality of a man's voice. Male voices that have lower fundamental frequencies and men who have larger vocal tracts are perceived as more attractive mates (Feinberg et al. 2005). Attraction to these vocal features might be explained by the link between voice pitch and testosterone levels, with deeper voices signaling higher testosterone, which may be another marker of higher status and/or genetic quality.

Behavior

In addition to physical appearance, there are certain male behaviors that women may have evolved to prefer in potential mates, because they are cues of a man's social status and/or his genetic quality. One cue is the amount of social dominance exhibited by a man. When trying to attract a romantic partner, men often try to demonstrate feats of strength or behave aggressively toward other men during competitive tasks. Women are also more likely to feel negatively about their current romantic partner and relationship when they are shown alternative partners who have more dominant personalities (Kenrick

et al. 1994). However, women do not derogate their current partner and relationship after seeing physically attractive alternative partners, which suggests that social dominance is a powerful, independent behavioral cue.

Although dominance is important, women also consider other personality traits when selecting mates. Jensen-Campbell et al. (1995) had women observe a male who displayed either high dominance, high agreeableness, both, or neither. High dominance led men to be rated as more attractive, only if men were also high in agreeableness. Men who were low in agreeableness were rated as less attractive, regardless of their level of dominance. Other studies have found that men who display kindness to women, but dominance to other men, are perceived as most attractive by women. These findings are consistent with the premise that women evolved to find displays of male dominance attractive, most likely because they are indicative of a man's social status. However, women are *most* drawn to men who direct aggression and dominance toward other men, decreasing the chance that such men might pose a threat to their female mates.

Risk-taking is another behavioral tactic that men use to attract mates. Skateboarders, for example, perform riskier tricks (with an increase in both successes and failures) when they are being observed by an attractive female experimenter than by an attractive male experimenter (Ronay and von Hippel 2010). Importantly, men observed by an attractive female had higher levels of testosterone, which were assessed immediately after they had performed tricks in front of the female experimenter.

Engaging in certain risk-taking behaviors should have been evolutionarily adaptive because ancestral women may have been more likely to mate with men who took calculated risks, especially if the outcomes were successful. Very little research, however, has examined whether and how women perceive different types of risky behaviors enacted by men. One study (Petraitis et al. 2014) asked women to rate the attractiveness of men who were taking two types of risks: "modern-day" risks (e.g., not wearing a seat belt) or risks faced by our ancestors (e.g., handling/

dealing with wild animals). Women rated men who took more risks as more attractive but only if those risks were in the ancestor category. Attraction to certain risk-taking behaviors enacted by men may have been beneficial to women in ancestral environments. Men who engaged in greater risk-taking may have been generally more successful at obtaining necessary food or resources needed for survival or at fending off adversaries.

In sum, women typically prefer men who are more socially dominant (but kind toward them) and who engage in some degree of risk-taking. Nevertheless, one must also take the broader social and environmental context into account to gain a more complete and accurate picture of female mate preferences. These contextual factors will now be discussed.

The Context

A growing body of research has begun to address how contextual variables influence female mate preferences. Three contexts shape a woman's attraction to potential mates: the general environment in which she lives; her local, social, and interpersonal environment; and where she is in her menstrual cycle (the fertile vs. infertile phase) when evaluating potential mates.

General Environment

The general environment in which a woman lives provides important contextual information that can alter her mating strategies and, therefore, affect her mate preferences. One important environmental variable is the local operational sex-ratio (i.e., the number of men relative to women seeking mates in a population). When there are more women and men in a population, the tendency to engage in short-term relationships and have more sexual partners increases, because men, being fewer in number, can act on their short-term mating tendencies. Moreover, when there are more men in a society, a man's socioeconomic status becomes much more predictive of his marital status, with higher SES men being more likely to marry (Pollet and Nettle 2008). Conversely, when women have more potential mates to choose from (i.e., when women are in

the mating minority), they become choosier and prefer mates who have more resources to offer.

Another important variable is the amount of pathogens in the local environment. In pathogen-prevalent environments, the threat of disease is higher, particularly for young children. In such environments, women ought to value indicators of a man's genetic quality more than his status or resources, given that "good genes" may protect subsequent offspring from the threat of disease. Indeed, women who live in environments with more pathogens value a man's physical attractiveness more than they do in low-pathogen environments (Gangestad and Buss 1993). Moreover, making the threat of pathogens salient to women shifts their mate preferences in theoretically consistent ways. Women who view information emphasizing high-pathogen prevalence shift their mate preferences to men who have more masculine characteristics and are more symmetrical compared to women who view cues of low-pathogen prevalence (Little et al. 2011).

Resources and a woman's access to them is another set of environmental factors that can affect female mate preferences. In societies that are more egalitarian with respect to gender issues, the mating preferences of men and women are more similar (Eagly and Wood 1999). Nevertheless, women who live in high socioeconomic status areas are more attracted to men who have a larger shoulder-to-hip ratio, whereas women in low SES areas prefer men who have a higher body mass index (Swami and Tovée 2005). These results are consistent with the notion that women evolved to prefer male traits that would have facilitated the survival and eventual reproduction of their offspring. A woman who has higher social status is likely to have enough resources to protect and provide for her children, so obtaining "good genes" should be prioritized and cues of physical strength should be valued, whereas a woman who has lower social status should prefer men who demonstrate their resource acquisition potential.

In sum, the broader environment in which a woman lives does shape her mate preferences. The operational sex-ratio in the local environment, cues of pathogen prevalence, and

environmental demands that increase the importance of providing resources shift whether a woman's mate preferences focus on pursuing men who have "good genes" versus those who can provide sufficient resources to her and her offspring.

Local Interpersonal Environment

Mate choice also takes place within a woman's local interpersonal environment, which influences with whom she interacts, her relative mate value, and the resources to which she does or does not have access. When examining women's preferences for warmth, attractiveness, and status in a mate, women who rate themselves as high in a specific category (e.g., warmth) are more likely to have higher and less flexible ideal standards for that category (Campbell et al. 2001). Women who believe they are more attractive also prefer characteristics such as greater facial symmetry and more sexually dimorphic features in mates. These and other results imply that women who are more desirable tend to adjust their mating strategies to attract the most desirable male partners. When there are more partners to choose from, women are in a better position to obtain men who score higher on all important qualities, and when the pool of available mates is smaller, their standards are lowered.

Whether a woman wants a short-term or a long-term relationship is another important determinant of what she finds attractive in a mate. When a woman is interested in a short-term relationship, markers of genetic quality are more important and more masculine facial and body features are preferred (e.g., Little et al. 2002).

Another critical interpersonal variable is incest avoidance. Children born to parents who are biologically related (e.g., cousins) are more likely to have physical abnormalities and health problems due to the inheritance of recessive genes. Accordingly, people rely on environmental cues to determine with whom they might be genetically related. The length of time a female has lived with a male during childhood and how much time the male has spent with her biological mother both decrease how attractive a man is to a woman, because these cues are associated with the

likelihood of being biologically related (Lieberman et al. 2007).

Both the general environment and the interpersonal environment can influence a woman's mate preferences in significant ways. Many of these effects, however, are qualified by whether women are in the fertile versus the nonfertile phase of their menstrual cycle.

Menstrual Cycle

Two phases of a woman's menstrual cycle tend to have different effects on her mate preferences: (1) the follicular (fertile) phase and (2) the luteal (nonfertile) phase. The follicular phase ends with ovulation, the time when having sex is most likely to result in a pregnancy. During the luteal phase, the chances of conception are much lower.

Women should have evolved to shift their mate preferences depending on the probability of conception (Thornhill and Gangestad 2008). Specifically, women should be more attracted to men who display indicators of "good genes" when they are looking for a short-term relationship rather than a long-term commitment. Consistent with this idea, when preferences for facial features are examined, women in the follicular phase are more attracted to men who have more masculine features compared to women in the luteal phase, suggesting that where a woman is in her menstrual cycle may partially explain some past mixed findings (Penton-Voak and Perrett 2000). This shift in preference toward more masculine features has also been demonstrated with more masculine voices and greater facial symmetry.

Where a woman is in her cycle also affects the specific behaviors she finds attractive in men. For example, socially dominant behaviors are significantly more attractive to women who are in the follicular phase (closer to ovulation) than in the luteal phase (e.g., Gangestad et al. 2004; Cantú et al. 2014). A recent meta-analysis confirmed that these shifts in attraction are fairly consistent when women are pursuing a short-term mate while ovulating (Gildersleeve et al. 2014).

Conclusion

This chapter has reviewed a wide variety of findings about the qualities that most women prefer in a mate. Early research focused primarily on the general preferences that women report. More recent research has focused on within-person variability in mate preferences and the specific environmental contexts that moderate (shift) these effects. Although more is now known about women's mate preferences and the evolutionary logic behind them, more research is needed to clarify how these evolved preferences affect established romantic relationships across time.

Cross-References

- ▶ [Contextual Factors](#)
- ▶ [Ovulation](#)

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