



## Mating markets and bargaining hands: Mate preferences for attractiveness and resources in two national U.S. studies



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### ABSTRACT

According to a “mating market” approach, people with desirable traits have a stronger “bargaining hand” and can be more selective when choosing partners. We examined how heterosexual mate preferences varied by gender, age, personal income, education, and appearance satisfaction (Study 1  $N = 22,815$ ; Study 2  $N = 4790$ ). Men and women differed in the percentage indicating it was “desirable” or “essential” that their potential partner was good-looking (92% vs. 84%;  $d = .39$ ), had a slender body (80% vs. 58%;  $d = .53$ ), had a steady income (74% vs. 97%;  $d = 1.17$ ), and made/will make a lot of money (47% vs. 69%;  $d = -.49$ ). There were also gender differences in whether it was “very important” or “a must have” their partner made at least as much money as they do (24% vs. 46%;  $d = .60$ ) and had a successful career (33% vs. 61%;  $d = .57$ ), but not in whether their partner was physically attractive to them (40% vs. 42%;  $d = .03$ ). Wealthier men and people with better appearance satisfaction had stronger preferences for good looking and slender partners. Preferences varied within and between genders, and were linked to bargaining hand in the mating market.

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### 1. Introduction

The metaphor of the “mating market” has been used to explain sources of systematic variation and individual differences in mate preferences (Pawlowski & Dunbar, 1999). The “mating market” describes the phenomenon whereby, in a heterosexual context, individuals compete with others of the same gender to make “bids” to members of the other gender for the purposes of securing a romantic partner. Bidding is a two-way process, and with whom individuals enter into romantic relationships depends on a) the qualities *they themselves prefer*, and b) the extent to which they possess qualities that *potential partners prefer*. If an individual possesses attractive traits, then he or she has a strong bargaining hand and can be relatively choosy

about what bids to accept. If an individual possesses less attractive traits, then he or she has a relatively weak bargaining hand. In the context of heterosexual mate choice, the “mating market” metaphor highlights how mate preferences of one gender predict the bargaining hands of members of the other gender. Thus, when people are free to choose their mates, each gender’s preferences influence which members of the other gender will themselves have the bargaining power to demand that a romantic partner possess the traits they most desire.

The mating market metaphor can be further extended to include a distinction between partner “necessities” versus “luxuries” (Li, Bailey, Kenrick, & Linsenmeier, 2002). Viewing a trait as essential (a “necessity”), rather than merely desirable (a “luxury”), will exclude a larger number of prospective partners. Therefore, examining the traits an individual labels as necessities or luxuries can provide a sensitive measure of the demands he or she makes when evaluating potential romantic partners. In the mating market, people possessing desirable traits can expect to attain a partner who embodies both their necessities and luxuries. In addition, those with desirable traits might be in a position to hold more traits as necessities.

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Drawing on evolutionary and mating market perspectives, we examined how men's and women's mate preferences vary by their own bargaining hand, including age, income, education, and appearance satisfaction. We further examined gender differences and similarities in the links between these traits and the importance individuals place on physical appearance and material financial resources when seeking a long-term partner. In contrast to much of previous research (see Li et al., 2002), we not only measured mate preferences but also the extent to which individuals considered these traits necessities—"essential" or "must haves"—versus luxuries. Furthermore, and also in contrast to much of previous research, rather than relying on college or small community samples to assess preferences, we present findings from two large U.S. datasets: a large web-based national study and a large nationally representative study of single adults. The current research provides the ability to examine mate preferences in national studies, and the large sample sizes enable tests of how different sociodemographics and personal characteristics interact when predicting mate preferences.

### 1.1. Reproductive biology and sex differences in long-term mate preferences

Human evolution was likely characterized by a mating system of mostly socially monogamous long-term pair-bonds, with some sexual polygyny (Fisher, 2016; Gray & Garcia, 2013). As a consequence of being a primarily pair-bonding species, both men and women faced the challenge of securing a cooperative long-term partner (Fisher, 2016; Gray & Garcia, 2013; Hrdy, 2009). However, as a result of differences in reproductive biology, men and women also face unique challenges when seeking a long-term mate. Two key differences in reproductive costs for human males and females are differences in the obligatory energetic investment of reproduction, including the costs of pregnancy and lactation (Trivers, 1972) and differences in potential reproductive rate (Clutton-Brock & Parker, 1992). Due to men's higher potential reproductive rate and women's greater obligatory reproductive costs, women are expected to have evolved relatively stronger preferences for partners who are willing and able to provide resources, and men are expected to have evolved relatively stronger preferences for partners with physical cues of reproductive potential.

The presence of a provisioning long-term partner can enable women to more easily meet their heightened parental costs when pregnant and nursing (Marlowe, 2003). While men and women generally value resources in a long-term romantic partner, previous studies have demonstrated that women more than men prefer partners with financial stability and higher income (e.g., Anderson & Klofstad, 2012; Buss, 1989; Li et al., 2002; Townsend & Levy, 1990; although this is not necessarily true in some ecological contexts, e.g., Pillsworth, 2008). As a contemporary example of this, in one study of a U.S. online dating website, men who reported higher incomes received more interest from women (Hitsch, Hortaçsu, & Arieli, 2010).

Women, more than men, prefer partners who are older, possibly because older age in men serves as a cue of greater access to resources and social status (de Sousa Campos, Otta, & de Oliveira Siqueira, 2002; Kenrick & Keefe, 1992). In addition to income, higher educational attainment may also be valued either because it is viewed as prestigious or because it is a cue to resources. Women, more so than men, tend to value a partner with higher educational attainment (Buunk, Dijkstra, Fetchenhauer, & Kenrick, 2002; Sprecher, Sullivan, & Hatfield, 1994).

In terms of potential reproductive rate, the maximum number of children a man can have with a long-term female partner is constrained by her inter-birth intervals. Men who form pair-bonds with relatively younger women would therefore have the potential to have more offspring with that partner than men who pair-bond with relatively older women. Thus, it has been hypothesized that human males evolved a preference for younger partners and for factors linked to attractiveness (e.g., smooth skin, facial and body symmetry), which serve as cues of youth and fecundity (Gallup & Frederick, 2010; Sugiyama, 2005). Consistent with this view, adult men tend to prefer partners

who are younger than themselves (Alterovitz & Mendelsohn, 2009; Buunk, Dijkstra, Kenrick, & Warntjes, 2001; Kaufman & Phua, 2003; Kenrick & Keefe, 1992; Marlowe, 2004).

Both men and women value physical attractiveness in a long-term romantic partner (Buss, 1989). Traits associated with physical attractiveness may be cues of a person's health, fertility, robustness, and/or social status (e.g., Buunk et al., 2002; Frederick & Haselton, 2007; Gallup & Frederick, 2010; Gangestad & Scheyd, 2005; Sugiyama, 2005). Both men and women consider physical attractiveness to be important in a long-term partner, but men typically rank or rate physical attractiveness as being of greater importance than do women, possibly because women's physical attractiveness is more strongly linked to cues of youth and therefore reproductive potential (Buss, 1989; Li et al., 2002; for an exception, see Pillsworth, 2008).

With respect to one's own bargaining hand in the mating market, attractiveness impacts a person's mating opportunities (Eastwick & Finkel, 2008), and past research has found that more attractive women indicate that a wider variety of desirable traits are indispensable in a romantic partner than do less attractive women (Buss & Shackelford, 2008). A person's satisfaction with their own appearance might also influence their demands on the mating market — people who feel more attractive or more satisfied might expect partners with more desirable traits.

Past research has generally not distinguished between whether men and women place different importance on having a partner who is generally good-looking versus a partner who is specifically attractive to them. But there may be different benefits to each. In some social settings, having a generally physically attractive partner might have greater benefits for men (e.g., increasing their perceived social status) than for women (Winegard, Winegard, & Geary, 2013), whereas being specifically attractive to them is based partly on idiosyncratic preferences.

Body fat level plays an important role in determining attractiveness and peoples' satisfaction with their own appearance, particularly for women. Men's preferences for body fat levels in women vary substantially across cultures, with relative thinness being considered most attractive in most industrialized countries (Frederick, Forbes, & Berezovskaya, 2008; Gray & Frederick, 2012; Swami et al., 2010). Body mass index (BMI) is a particularly strong predictor of attractiveness rating, with women at the lower end of the "normal" range of body mass generally rated most attractive (Swami & Tovee, 2005; Tovee, Reinhardt, Emery, & Cornelissen, 1998). Men who are lean and toned are rated most attractive by women (Frederick & Haselton, 2007). When compared with those with lower body masses, both men and women who have higher body masses tend to be least satisfied with their own appearance (Frederick, Forbes, Grigorian, & Jarcho, 2007; Frederick, Peplau, & Lever, 2006). Popular media and news outlets often promote the idea that body mass is linked to poorer health, and experimental research shows these beliefs cause people to have more negative attitudes towards both men and women with higher body masses (Saguy, Frederick, & Gruys, 2014). Therefore, in addition to examining the overall importance people attach to attractiveness in a partner, we also specifically examined importance placed on a slender partner, which was expected to be a particularly strong preference among men given the valuation of female thinness in the U.S.

**Hypothesis 1.** Preferences for income and attractiveness by gender, age, own income, and appearance satisfaction

We predicted gender differences in preferences for income and attractiveness, with men placing more importance than women do on a good looking partner and women placing more importance than men do on factors related to resources. We also explored gender differences in how important it is to be physically attracted to a potential or current partner.

We did not predict that age would generally be associated with preferences for attractiveness and income. Whereas men were expected to

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