



Women want taller men more than men want shorter women

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ABSTRACT

Physical characteristics, such as height, play an important role in human mate preferences. Satisfaction with one's own height and one's partner height seem likely to be related to these preferences. Using a student sample ($N = 650$), we show that women are not only more selective, but also more consistent, than men, in their partner height preferences. Women prefer, on average, a larger height difference between themselves and their partner (i.e. males being much taller than themselves) than men do. This effect is even more pronounced when examining satisfaction with actual partner height: women are most satisfied when their partner was 21 cm taller, whereas men are most satisfied when they were 8 cm taller than their partner. Next, using data from our sample and that of a previously published study ($N = 52,677$), we show that for men, height is more important to the expression of satisfaction with one's own height than it is for women. Furthermore, slightly above average height women and tall men are most satisfied with their heights. We conclude that satisfaction with one's own height is at least partly a consequence of the height preference of the opposite sex and satisfaction with one's partner height.

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1. Introduction

1.1. Height in couples

Physical characteristics play an important role in human mate choice (Barber, 1995; Frederick, Hadji-Michael, Furnham, & Swami, 2010; Kurzban & Weeden, 2005), and human height was among the first of these physical characteristics to be studied. As early as 1903, Pearson and Lee observed in a British sample that heights between partners were more similar than heights between non-partners (Pearson & Lee, 1903). This pattern has been labeled assortative mating, i.e. the existence of a positive correlation between partner characteristics, and has been observed for height in many populations (see Spuhler, 1982 for review). Gillis and Avis (1980) were the first to document another non-random pattern with respect to partner heights, the male-taller norm: in married couples both from the UK and US, the woman was more frequently shorter than her husband than expected by chance.

1.2. Preferences for romantic partner height

Observed mating patterns with respect to height are likely a consequence of mate preferences for stature within each sex

(Courtial, Raymond, Godelle, & Ferdy, 2010b). Indeed, much research has focussed on the role of height in partner preferences, and these preferences have been studied in a variety of settings, such as lab-based experiments (reviewed in Courtial et al., 2010b), responses to online advertisements (Pawlowski & Koziel, 2002), and speed-dating (Kurzban & Weeden, 2005). In line with findings on actual couples, these studies have consistently found that taller individuals prefer taller partners compared to shorter individuals (i.e. an assortative preference) and that both men and women prefer to be part of a couple where the man is taller than the woman (i.e. a male-taller preference) (Fink, Neave, Brewer, & Pawlowski, 2007; Pawlowski, 2003). These studies also suggest that women prefer men who are not too tall and that men prefer women who are not too short (Salska et al., 2008). The different preferences in men and women result in tall men, but not too tall, being most preferred by the opposite sex, whereas average height women are most preferred by men (Courtial et al., 2010b). Preferences for partner height differences are also dependent on one's own height. Pawlowski (2003) was the first to show that both shorter men and taller women tend to prefer smaller partner height differences than taller men and shorter women, who both prefer larger partner height differences. Reasons as to why height is preferred in a mate has been extensively discussed in the literature (Barber, 1995; Buunk, Park, Zurriaga, Klavina, & Massar, 2008; Courtial et al., 2010b; Fink et al., 2007; Salska et al., 2008; Stulp, Pollet, Verhulst, & Buunk, 2012; Stulp, Verhulst, Pollet, & Buunk, 2012; Swami et al., 2008).

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1.3. Satisfaction with height

Given the role of height in mate preferences and mate choice, one would expect that satisfaction with one's own height would at least be partly contingent on the preferences shown by the opposite sex, but surprisingly few studies have addressed whether this holds true. Perhaps the most extreme example of dissatisfaction with height is the existence of hormone therapies in order to either reduce or increase one's adult height. Whereas hormone therapies to increase height are used for both sexes (Allen, 2006), therapies to reduce growth are more common for women (Pyett et al., 2005). The choice for hormone therapy is often based on the decision of the parents or a physician rather than that of the child, and many hormonally treated tall women are dissatisfied with such a decision (Pyett et al., 2005). This is particularly remarkable when considering that tall untreated women are not necessarily dissatisfied with their height (Lever, Frederick, Laird, & Sadeghi-Azar, 2007). A more thorough understanding of how satisfaction with one's own height is affected by an individual's height is important in deciding whether hormone therapy, with its potentially grave side effects, should be considered.

1.4. This study

The present study expands previous research and theory in several ways. First, we aimed to replicate previous findings with respect to preferences for partner height differences (Courtial et al., 2010b; Fink et al., 2007; Pawlowski, 2003; Salska et al., 2008), using a more detailed series of questions, thereby enabling a more thorough understanding of how partner preferences for stature operate. Our second aim was to examine satisfaction with one's own height in both sexes, and we expected height to be more important with respect to explaining satisfaction with one's own height for men than for women – an assumption that has rarely been formally tested. Furthermore, we hypothesized that individuals would be most satisfied with their own height when this height was the one most preferred by the opposite sex. Our final aim was to investigate to what extent the height of one's partner influences one's satisfaction with his or her height, and we hypothesized that partner height will influence the satisfaction of women more than that of men. To our knowledge, this is the first study addressing satisfaction with one's partner height.

2. Method

2.1. Participants and protocol

All participants were first year psychology students from a large European university who participated in exchange for course credits ($N = 693$). Participants first provided the following socio-demographic information: age, sex, height, weight, ethnicity and sexual orientation. Because most students were either Dutch or German, we coded Ethnicity as either Dutch ($N = 405$), German ($N = 201$) or other ($N = 44$). Participants then answered a series of questions concerning their partner height preferences; we asked about their (i) ideally preferred, (ii) minimally acceptable, and (iii) maximally acceptable partner height (all in cm). We also asked about their relationship status (single or in a relationship). If the participants indicated that they had a romantic partner, they were then asked to report on (i) their partner's actual height, and (ii) their satisfaction with their partner's height. Last, all participants indicated the degree of satisfaction with their own height. Satisfaction was measured on a 100-point scale, anchored at 50.

We only included heterosexual participants and those that reported their own height, reducing our sample to 650 participants

(461 women). The 461 women in our sample reported an average height of 170.94 (± 5.926) cm and age of 19.96 (± 2.778) years, and the 189 men were on average 184.60 (± 7.960) cm tall and 20.96 (± 2.751) years old.

2.2. Statistical analysis

For all the independent sample *t*-tests we performed with respect to the preferences for partner height, we dealt with unequal variances, such that there was more variance in preferences among men than among women (all Levene's tests $F \geq 8.99$; $p \leq .003$). Cohen's *d* was determined by dividing the mean difference between groups by the pooled standard deviation. This method has been argued to be robust in cases where the differences of variances are not too large (Rosnow, Rosenthal, & Rubin, 2000), as is the case in our study. We also examined quadratic and cubic terms of height when examining satisfaction with one's own and one's partner height. In the electronic supplementary material we provide General Linear Model estimates for all interactions between sex and height (or height difference) on all variables examined. Controlling for age and ethnicity did not change any of our reported results (results not shown).

In order to investigate the validity of our results with respect to height satisfaction, we compared our findings to a sample reported in previous studies (Frederick, Peplau, & Lever, 2006; Lever et al., 2007). Frederick et al. (2006) examined satisfaction with one's own height (among others) in 52,677 heterosexual individuals ($N = 26,963$ women) that completed a 'Sex and Body Image Survey' on either MSNBC.com or Elle.com. Individuals were asked: "How do you feel about your height?" and could respond with three options: "I wish I were taller", "I wish I were shorter", and "I feel okay about my height". We analyzed the data using a logistic regression, with the binary dependent variable coded as whether the participant felt okay or not about his or her height. All analyses were performed in SPSS 17.0.

3. Results

3.1. Preferences for partner height

3.1.1. Preferred partner height

An individual's height correlated significantly and positively with preferred partner height in both men ($r = .47$; $p < .001$; $N = 188$) and women ($r = .54$; $p < .001$; $N = 461$): taller men and women preferred taller partners than shorter men and women (Fig. 1; ESM Table 1). Next, we calculated the preferred differences between one's own height and that of one's partner. We found that male height was positively correlated ($r = .69$; $p < .001$; $N = 188$) and that female height was negatively correlated with preferred partner height difference ($r = -.49$; $p < .001$; $N = 461$; ESM Table 2). Thus, taller men and shorter women preferred larger height differences, i.e. the male partner being much taller, whereas shorter men and taller women preferred smaller height differences, i.e. the male partner being only slightly taller (in line with Pawlowski (2003)). On average, women preferred a larger partner height difference (13.45 ± 5.61 cm) than men (12.11 ± 7.44 ; $t(277.81) = 2.23$; $p = .027$; $d = .21$).

3.1.2. Minimally and maximally acceptable partner height

Men and women differed significantly in the minimally acceptable partner height ($t(277.20) = 6.37$; $p < .0001$; $d = 0.62$; Fig. 1). Women required on average a height difference of at least 3.72 (± 5.54) cm, whereas men were willing to accept a virtually zero difference of -0.053 (± 7.29) cm. One sample *t*-tests revealed that women (460) = 14.41; $p < .0001$; $d = 0.67$), but not men

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