



Waist-to-hip ratio and female physical attractiveness: The moderating role of power motivation and the mating context

Heinz-Dieter Schmalt *

Bergische Universität, Fachbereich G – Psychologie, Gaußstr. 20, 42097 Wuppertal, Germany

Received 11 October 2005; received in revised form 13 February 2006

Available online 3 April 2006

Abstract

The purpose of the present investigation was to extend the validity of Singh's (1993) hypothesis of the effect of waist-to-hip ratio (WHR) on judgments of female attractiveness, using a motivational perspective which builds on motives and incentives. It is argued that the well-documented preference for normal weight females with a WHR of .7 is moderated by the power motive and by short-term vs. long-term mating contexts. A total of 133 participants (58 male, 75 female) were recruited to rate 12 line drawings varying in weight and WHR. Participants had to rate females' attractiveness judged from the perspective of a person who is looking for a partner in a short-term, long-term, and work-partner relationship. Furthermore, individual differences in power motivation were examined. On the basis of evolutionary psychological considerations, it was expected and found that the preference for the .7 WHR and normal-weight category was moderated by individual differences as well as by situational contexts; with a stronger preference profile for individuals high in power motivation and for individuals who are looking for a partner in a short-term relationship. Results are interpreted in an evolutionary context which describes variable mating strategies as conditional on dispositional (motive) and situational (incentive) factors.

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Keywords: Waist-to-hip ratio; Short-term and long-term mating strategies; Attractiveness; Power motivation

* Tel.: +49 202 439 2392; fax: +49 202 439 2396.

E-mail address: schmalt@uni-wuppertal.de

1. Introduction

Evolutionary theories of human mate selection hold that strategies for selecting mating partners follow biological rules which enable men and women to enhance their reproductive success. Biological conditions and differential constraints in men and women, however, required differentiated gender-specific reproductive strategies, which are the result of different selection pressures operating on our ancestors. Historically, men have been constrained in their reproductive success primarily by the number of fertile women they can inseminate (Buss & Schmitt, 1993). Men's problems in order to ensure reproductive success are twofold: to identify women who are sexually accessible and who are able to bear healthy children (Buss, 1999; Buss & Schmitt, 1993; Gangestad & Simpson, 2000; Kenrick, Li, & Butner, 2003; Li, Bailey, Kenrick, & Linsenmeier, 2002).

But how can a man “figure out” which woman can help to ensure his reproductive success? The capacity of a woman to bear healthy children is not written on her forehead. That is why ancestral humans used various – often indirect – cues that provide information concerning a woman's reproductive potential. With reference to bodily features of females, Singh (1993, 1994) has described an attribute that is both a marker of a female's reproductive potential and is regarded as attractive at the same time. He has argued that female body shape, especially the waist-to-hip ratio (WHR) is a reliable indicator of a female's reproductive status, reproductive capability, and health status. There are typical patterns of fat distribution in men and women which are under the control of sex hormones. Gynoid (female) and android (male) fat distributions engender a typical sex difference in WHR. For women it is considerably lower (.67–.80) than for men (.85–.95). The critical ratio of $\text{WHR} = .7$ is judged as highly attractive because it is a marker of fat distribution in the female body that is inherently related to the ability to bear healthy children. If this conception is valid, men should be able to “interpret” these female features and to use this information in assessing a female's attractiveness and in making a decision on whom to mate with. A number of recent studies have corroborated this contention and have shown that variations in female WHR (in combination with weight) are important determinants of perceived attractiveness, reproductive potential, and health status (Forestell, Humphrey, & Stewart, 2004; Furnham, Moutafi, & Baguma, 2002; Furnham, Mistry, & McClelland, 2004; Henss, 1995, 2000; Singh, 1993; Tassinary & Hansen, 1998). These studies varied experimentally the weight and WHR of pictured females (line drawings and color photographs) and found (with some exceptions, however (e.g., Furnham et al., 2002)) that both men and women of different social classes, age groups, and different countries find a figure with moderate weight and with a WHR of approximately .7 to be the most attractive.

While most WHR research focused exclusively on bodily characteristics of the female stimulus figures the present investigation incorporates the WHR concept into a broader motivational framework in which motives and situational contexts (incentives) play an important role. Motives and incentives are key ingredients in most modern theories of motivation (Atkinson, 1964; Eccles & Wigfield, 2002; Feather, 1982; Heckhausen, 1991; McClelland, 1985; Schneider & Schmalt, 2000). A motive is regarded as a personal predisposition (capacity) to strive for certain valued goals and an incentive refers to situational factors that signal the opportunity to accomplish those valued goals. It is hypothesized that individual differences in a motive disposition to appreciate

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