Gender Differences: What We Seek in Romantic and Sexual Partners

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Abstract   The purpose of this study was to investigate gender differences with regard to what we seek in romantic and sexual partners, as well as to examine differences between those currently in a relationship and those who are not. Participants were 87 undergraduate students (29 males, 58 females) recruited from a college in the northeast. Author-created surveys modeled along the lines on the research done by Buss & Barnes (1986) were constructed, which asked participants to rank the importance of characteristics, as well as rank the three most important and three least important characteristics with regards to what they seek in romantic and sexual partners. The results indicated that females place as much importance on physical attractiveness as an ideal characteristic in a sexual partner as males. Both males and females viewed loyalty as the most important characteristic in a romantic partner. Students who were in a relationship and those not in a relationship viewed loyalty as the most important characteristic in romantic partner, but viewed physical attractiveness as the most important characteristic in a sexual partner. Males also considered financial resources as a least important characteristic when thinking of an ideal romantic partner. Implications of this study are discussed.

Keywords   Gender Differences, Romantic Partners, Sexual Partners

1. Introduction

Numerous studies that have examined what males and females seek in a partner (Goodwin & Tinker, 2000; Regan, Levin, Sprecher, Christopher, & Cate, 2000; Sprecher, Sullivan & Hatfield, 1994). Along these lines, Wiederman & Dubois (1998) studied sex differences in short-term partner preferences between 106 male and 114 female college students. The preferences were measured by having participants read 50 descriptions of potential short-term mates and rate their desirability on a scale of 1 (extremely undesirable) to 6 (extremely desirable). The results indicated that "compared to women, men placed more emphasis on the physical attractiveness of potential short-term mates and women placed more emphasis on a potential mate's generosity" and "that that both men and women appear to have placed the most emphasis on the physical attractiveness of potential short-term mates when making their judgments." (p. 159).

Simpson & Gangestad (1992) examined individual differences in sociosexual orientation and how it related to the types of attributes people preferred in romantic partners with 221 male and 252 female undergraduate college students. Participants completed the Romantic Partner Attribute Index (Buss & Barnes, 1986) that consisted of 15 attributes (examples include: financial resources, intelligence, and sense of humor) and were asked to rate each attribute from 1 (not at all) to 9 (extremely important) according to how much they felt it influenced their selection of a romantic partner. The results indicated that men rated sex appeal and physical attractiveness higher than women, and women rated kindness and understanding, faithfulness and loyalty, fun and exciting personality, stability of personality, similarity of values, responsibility, and financial resources higher than men.

Buss (1989) explored sex differences in mate preferences with a sample of 10,047 participants (37 samples which were obtained from 33 countries located on six continents and five islands). In addition to providing demographic information, participants rated 18 characteristics (Hill, 1945) on how important or desirable each would be in choosing a mate on a 4 point scale (3 = indispensable, 0 = irrelevant or unimportant). Interspersed through the characteristics were the target variables: "good financial prospect," "good looks," "chastity," "no previous sexual intercourse," "ambition and industriousness." The second survey covered preferences concerning potential mates. Interspersed among the 13 characteristics were target variables: "good earning capacity" and "physically attractive" developed from the factor-analysis (Buss & Barnes, 1986) of an expanded 76-item instrument (Gough, 1973). Subjects ranked the characteristics on their desirability in a mate they might marry with the first being most desirable, down to the thirteenth most desirable. The results indicated that in 36 of the 37 samples, "females valued "good financial prospect" in

a potential mate more highly than did males." (p. 5). For thirty-four out of the thirty-seven samples (92%), females deemed higher value on ambition-industriousness than males. Additionally, males preferred younger mates and preferred to marry a woman who was around 24 years old. In contrast, females preferred males older than they were.

Along similar lines, Regan, Levin, Sprecher, Christopher & Cate (2000) examined 23 characteristics or traits in a "short-term sexual" partner (a one-night stand or other short-term sexual affair) or "long-term romantic" partner (a steady, dating, cohabiting, marital, or other long-term romantic relationship) with 561 (55% female, 45% male) undergraduate college students. Participants completed a questionnaire that included a list of 23 traits or characteristics (examples include: physically attractive, warm and kind, healthy, access to material possessions, and sexually passionate/high sex drive) and asked to indicate how they would like their partner to compare to others on each characteristic. For half of the participants, they were asked to indicate their preferences with regard to a "short-term sexual relationship" and the other half were asked to indicate their preferences with regard to a "long-term romantic relationship."

The results indicated that "internal traits and attributes generally were preferred more than external characteristics. For example, attributes indicative of an outgoing and expressive disposition (e.g., humor. Friendliness, sociability, exciting personality), as well as socially appealing traits as intelligence, warmth, kindness and honesty and trustworthiness, were preferred to a greater degree than social status and physical appearance attributes" (p. 13). In addition, "although men and women desired their short-term sex partners to demonstrate approximately the same levels of sexual passion and sex drive, men preferred a greater amount of sexual attributes than did women from their long-term romantic partners." (p. 14).

When examining priorities and preferences in an ideal partner, Goodwin & Tinker (2002) found that

men valued physical attractiveness and women valued a university graduate. Respondents with more education sought an intelligent partner who was a university graduate as well, while as younger respondents sought an "exciting" partner who was easy-going and wanted children, and older respondents seeking a partner who was creative.

Sprecher, Sullivan & Hatfield (1994) examined gender differences in mate selection preferences found that significant gender differences where "men were more willing than women to marry someone younger by 5 years, someone who earned less, and someone who had less education. Women were more willing than men to marry someone who was not good-looking, someone older by 5 years, someone who earned more than they did, and someone who had more education." (p. 1078).

Given the research on gender differences and mate preferences, it was felt that this study would contribute significantly to the body of research. The purpose of the current study was to investigate gender differences with regard to characteristics sought in romantic and sexual partners.

2. Research Questions

1. Would there be differences between males and females in what they seek in an ideal romantic partner?
2. Would there be differences between males and females in what they seek in an ideal sexual partner?
3. What are the top three most important and three least important characteristics that men and women value in their ideal romantic partner?
4. What are the top three most important and three least important characteristics that men and women value in their ideal sexual partner?
5. What are the top three and bottom three characteristics sought after in an ideal romantic partner for people in a relationship and not in a relationship?
6. What are the top three and bottom three characteristics sought after in an ideal sexual partner for people in a relationship and not in a relationship?
7. Would there be a difference between people in a relationship and not in a relationship with regards to ideal romantic partner statements?

3. Methodology

Participants surveyed were 87 undergraduate students at a college in the northeast. There were 29 males (33.3%) and 58 females (66.7%). Students ranged in age from 17-23 (mean age = 19.99, SD = 1.19). The sample included 20 freshmen (23%), 29 sophomores (33.3%), 27 juniors (31%) and 11 seniors (12.6%). Of the 87 participants, 68 (78.2%) indicated that they live on campus and 18 (20.7%) indicated that they lived off campus.

3.1. Instrumentation

Six instruments were administered to participants in this study. All instruments were author-created. The first instrument was a demographic questionnaire that asked participants their age, gender, class standing and GPA. The second instrument asked participants to rank each characteristic based on their importance when thinking of their ideal romantic partner, on a scale from 1-5 (where 1 = unimportant to 5 = very important). Examples of characteristics include, kindness, social status, qualities of a good parent, and emotional stability. The third instrument asked the participants to indicate the three most important and three least important characteristics they look for in an ideal romantic partner. Examples of characteristics include, sense of humor, loyalty, and attractiveness. The fourth instrument asked participants to rank each characteristic

based on their importance when thinking of their ideal sexual partner on a scale from 1-5 (where 1 = unimportant to 5 = very important). The fifth instrument asked participants to indicate the three most important and three least important traits when thinking of their ideal sexual partner. Items on these scales were taken from the research conducted by Buss (1986) and other researchers. The sixth instrument asked participants to rank each statement on a 5-point scale, (1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree) to eight statements. These included "I think it's important to be friends with a romantic partner before I commit to them", "It's important for my romantic partner to want children", "My current romantic partner is similar to my ideal romantic partner", "My ideal romantic partner has the same values as I do", "My ideal romantic partner is kind and understanding", "My ideal romantic partner has a sense of humor", "I think it is important for my romantic partner to be physically attractive", and "My romantic partner needs to be as ambitious as I am."

4. Analysis of Data

4.1. Gender Differences in Ideal Romantic Partner

Significant difference between males and females with respect to the ideal romantic partner for the following characteristics: kindness and understanding, $F(1,85) = 4.92$, $p < .05$; responsibility, $F(1,86) = 6.48$, $p < .05$; qualities of a good parent, $F(1,86) = 7.81$, $p < .05$; social status, $F(1,86) =$ 9.467, $p < .05$; financial resources, $F(1,86) = 28.62$, $p < .05$; desire for children, $F(1,86) = 7.35$, $p < .05$; dependable character, $F(1,86) = 6.35$, $p < .05$; neatness, $F(1,85) = 4.59$, $p < .05$; older than me, $F(1,85) = 12.44$, $p < .05$; shorter than me, $F(1,86) = 11.37$, $p < .05$; and taller than me, $F(1,86) = 29.96$, $p < .05$.

4.2. Gender Differences in Ideal Sexual Partner

Significant difference between males and females with respect to the ideal romantic partner for the following characteristics: kindness and understanding, $F(1,86) = 15.61$, $p < .05$; loyalty, $F(1,85) = 8.01$, $p < .05$; responsible, $F(1,86) = 11.17$, $p < .05$; sense of humor, $F(1,86) = 12.49$, $p < .05$; financial resources, $F(1,86) = 8.07$, $p < .05$; mutual attraction/love, $F(1,86) = 4.62$, $p < .05$; maturity, $F(1,86) = 11.28$, $p < .05$; dependable character, $F(1,86) = 12.37$, $p < .05$; intelligence, $F(1,86) = 15.73$, $p < .05$; neatness, $F(1,86) = 5.93$, $p < .05$; ambition, $F(1,86) = 7.86$, $p < .05$; no previous sexual partners, $F(1,86) = 5.15$, $p < .05$; older than me, $F(1,86) = 21.48$, $p < .05$; taller than me, $F(1.86) = 17.49$, $p < .05$.

4.3. Gender Differences and Ideal Romantic Partner Characteristics

Frequencies were conducted to determine gender differences with regard to the top and bottom three characteristics sought in an ideal romantic partner. The results are presented in Table 1 below.

Table 1.   Top and Bottom Three Characteristics for Ideal Romantic Partner by Gender

	All Participants	Males	Females
Top Three Characteristics	1. Loyalty (n = 60) 2. Mutual Love (n = 37) 3. Humor (n = 32)	1. Loyalty (n = 22) 2. Humor (n = 10) 3. Mutual Love (n = 10)	1. Loyalty (n = 38) 2. Mutual Love (n = 27) 3. Kindness (n = 26)
Bottom Three Characteristics	1. Social Status (n = 34) 2. Shorter than me (n = 34) 3. Younger than me (n = 31)	1. Older than me (n = 12) 2. Younger than me (n = 11) 3. Financial Resources (n = 31)	1. Shorter than me (n = 27) 2. Social Status (n = 26) 3. Younger than me (n = 20)

4.4. Gender Differences and Ideal Sexual Partner Characteristics

Frequencies were conducted to determine gender differences with regard to the top and bottom three characteristics sought in an ideal sexual partner. The results are presented Table 2 below.

Table 2.   Top and Bottom Three Characteristics for Ideal Sexual partner by Gender

	All Participants	Males	Females
Top Three Characteristics	1. Physical Attractiveness (n = 68) 2. Sex appeal (n = 64) 3. Fun and exciting personality (n = 38)	1. Sex appeal (n=26) 2. Physical attractiveness (n=25) 3. Fun and exciting personality (n=12)	1. Physical attractiveness (n=43) 2. Sex appeal (n=38) 3. Fun and exciting personality (n=26)
Bottom Three Characteristics	1. Desire for Children (n=44) 2. Qualities of a good parent (n=28) 3. Loyalty (n = 23)	1. Desire for children (n=14) 2. Financial resources (n=8) 3. Loyalty (n=8)	1. Desire for children (n=30) 2. Humor (n=19) 3. Loyalty (n=15)

4.5. Relationship Status and Ideal Romantic Partner Characteristics

Frequencies were conducted to determine the top and bottom three characteristics in an ideal romantic partner by relationship status. The results are presented Table 3 below.

Table 3. Top and Bottom Three Characteristics for Ideal Romantic Partner by Relationship Status

	Those In a Relationship	Those Not in a Relationship
Top Three Characteristics	1. Loyalty (n = 36) 2. Kindness (n = 25) 3. Mutual Love (n = 19)	1. Loyalty (n = 24) 2. Mutual Love (n = 18) 3. Kindness (n = 12)
Bottom Three Characteristics	1. Social Status (n = 22) 2. Shorter than me (n = 19) 3. Previous Sexual Partners (n = 18)	1. Shorter than me (n = 15) 2. Younger than me (n = 14) 3. Social Status (n = 12)

4.6. Relationship Status and Ideal Sexual Partner Characteristics

Frequencies were conducted to determine the top and bottom three characteristics as well as the three sought after in an ideal sexual partner by relationship status. The results are presented Table 4 below.

Table 4. Top and Bottom Three Characteristics for Ideal Sexual Partner by Relationship Status

	Those In a Relationship	Those Not in a Relationship
Top Three Characteristics	1. Physical Attractiveness (n = 39) 2. Sex Appeal (n = 38) 3. Fun and Exciting Personality (n = 23)	1. Physical Attractiveness (n = 29) 2. Sex Appeal (n = 26) 3. Fun and Exciting Personality (n = 15)
Bottom Three Characteristics	1. Desire for Children (n = 28) 2. Qualities of a good parent (n = 16) 3. Loyalty (n = 14)	1. Desire for Children (n = 16) 2. Qualities of a good parent (n = 12) 3. Financial Resources (n = 10)

4.7. Relationship Status and Partner Statements

The results indicated significant relationship differences were only found for one statement, "It's important for my romantic partner to want children," $F(1, 86) = 4.61$, $p < .05$, with those in a relationship indicating greater agreement than those not in a relationship.

5. Discussion

The goal of this study was to investigate gender differences with regards to what we seek in romantic and sexual partners, as well as to examine differences in participants who are currently in romantic relationships and those who are not. Four interesting findings emerged from the study.

1. Both men and women view loyalty as the most important characteristic in a romantic partner.

2. Males considered financial resources as the least important characteristic in an ideal partner.

3. Both males and females viewed the top three characteristics in the same way for an ideal sexual partner.

4. Individuals who were in a relationship as well as those not in a relationship picked the same top three characteristics as important in a sexual partner.

The findings of the current study suggest that men and women are more alike regarding what they seek in romantic and sexual partners, as well as those in and out of relationships (Buss, 1989; Regan, Levin, Sprecher, Christopher & Cate, 2000); men and women, regardless of relationship status seek very similar traits in their partners. Eastwick & Neff (2012) state that "ideal partner preferences do have implications for marital stability: Marriages were more likely to survive when participants' perceptions of their spouses' patterns of traits matched their pattern of ideal partner preferences." (p. 672).

In previous research studies, men have put greater emphasis on physical attractiveness in a short-term partner, while females tended to put greater emphasis on a potential mate's generosity (Wiederman & Dubois, 1998). The results of this study indicate that females place just as much importance on physical attractiveness in their short-term partners as their male counterparts. In addition, Wiederman & Dubois (1998) also indicated that women place greater importance on social status and financial resources in their mates. However, in current study, it was interesting to note that both males and females ranked and considered financial resources and social status as least important characteristics.

The lack of significant results with regard to seven out of the eight partner statements and relationship status is intriguing, suggesting that individuals who are in a relationship and those not in a relationship did not differ in their views. Since the study was conducted with undergraduate college students, future research should examine this with a different sample of students to ascertain if their views differ or not.

6. Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to examine the gender differences with regards to characteristics that we seek in romantic and sexual partners. While the current study does offer useful results to inform the literature, we suggest that further research should be conducted to understand gender differences with regard to selection of partner characteristics. Caution should be used in interpreting the results of the current study due to variables like size of the college and student characteristics. We recommend that the study be conducted with a larger sample of students, as well as a more diverse setting, as these could be important factors in determining gender differences in partner selection.

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