

## IDEAL PARTNER PREFERENCES AMONG ADOLESCENTS

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Most researchers interested in mate preference have focused on the desires of adult men and women. Few empirical investigations have been conducted on the preferences of adolescent boys and girls, despite the fact that this developmental period represents a time of awakening romantic and sexual interest. The authors asked 46 teenage boys and girls (average age = 15.09 years) to indicate their preferences for various characteristics in an ideal long-term romantic or short-term sexual partner (randomly assigned). Both sexes emphasized attributes related to physical appeal (e.g., attractive physical appearance, sexy appearance) and sexual drive (e.g., sexual passion, high sex drive, sexual responsiveness) when evaluating a casual sexual partner. Conversely, participants focused more upon intellect and other mentally appealing attributes (e.g., intelligence, humor) when considering a romantic partner. No sex differences were found, suggesting that teenage boys and girls share a similar conception of the "perfect" partner.

Adolescence is a time of sexual and romantic awakening (see Christopher, 2001; Collins & Laursen, 2000). Developmental theorists posit that one of the most important tasks faced by adolescent boys and girls is the formation of romantic relationships (e.g., Erikson, 1968; Sullivan, 1953), and empirical research provides evidence that dating is an important component of this life stage. For example, surveys reveal that most boys and girls have had at least some dating experience by the age of 16 (e.g., Dowdy & Kliewer, 1998; Getts, 1988; Phinney, Jensen, Olsen, & Cundick, 1990), and many go on to establish serious dating relationships (Thornton, 1990). Indeed, almost three-fourths of the 153 high school senior girls surveyed by Muram, Rosenthal, Tolley, Peeler, and Dorko (1991) stated that they had "gone steady." Similar results were reported

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by Neemann, Hubbard, and Masten (1995), who surveyed 176 adolescents – ranging from 14 to 19 years of age – about their relationship experiences. Most (43%) of the participants reported having a long-term romantic partner (e.g., steady date, cohabiting partner, fiancé[e], or spouse), with an additional 38% indicating that they dated regularly but lacked an official steady partner. Only 19% claimed no current dating involvement. When the researchers recontacted their participants approximately two years later, the percentage reporting no dating activity or steady partner had dropped to 11%. Thus, romantic attachments clearly are part and parcel of this developmental period.

So, too, is sexuality. Data gathered by Juhasz, Kaufman, and Meyer (1986) suggest that teenagers spend a considerable amount of time thinking about sex. These researchers surveyed 451 high school students about various aspects of sexuality and found that 84% of the boys and 61% of the girls reported thinking about sex "often" or "fairly often". Many adolescents also experience high levels of sexual desire and excitement, either as a general response or toward a particular individual or partner. A survey of high school students conducted by Useche, Villegas, and Alzate (1990) revealed that large numbers of boys (80.2%) and girls (48.5%) experienced sexual desire at least once a week. Similarly, over 80% of the high school girls who participated in the study by Muram et al. (1991) reported being sexually excited by their dating partners.

In addition, many adolescents and young adults believe that sex is an important and appropriate element of dating relationships – particularly when the partners are committed or "serious" (Reiss, 1964; Sprecher, McKinney, Walsh, & Anderson, 1988) – and feel that sex can bring a couple closer together (Muram et al., 1991). Given the prevalence of these sexual feelings and attitudes, it is perhaps not surprising that increasing numbers of teenagers (and preteenagers) are becoming sexually active. Large-scale surveys indicate that most adolescent boys and girls have engaged in some form of sexual activity, including sexual intercourse, by the age of 16 (e.g., Brook, Balka, Abernathy, & Hamburg, 1994; Leitenberg & Saltzman, 2000; Zelnik & Kantner, 1980).

In sum, adolescence is a developmental period that is characterized by an awakening interest and increased involvement in sexual and romantic relationships. Consequently, teenagers and young adults make ideal participants for researchers interested in exploring human mating dynamics. However, very little research has been conducted on the mate preferences of younger populations. Rather, most researchers interested in this topic have focused on the desires of adult populations. Numerous studies conducted with samples of adult men and women from a variety of cultures reveal that both sexes overwhelmingly prefer intelligent, honest, and emotionally stable partners who are physically attractive and who possess a "good" or "exciting" personality (e.g., Buss, 1989; Regan & Berscheid, 1997; Sprecher, Sullivan, & Hatfield, 1994).

Do younger individuals possess similar desires with regard to potential mates? The present investigation was designed to answer this question and to expand upon previous research by examining partner preferences among a sample of adolescent boys and girls. In addition, because preferences may shift as a function of the type of relationship under consideration, an experimental manipulation was included to allow a comparison between preferences for a short-term sexual partner and a long-term romantic partner. No specific a priori hypotheses were created due to the paucity of existing mate preference research conducted with younger samples.

## METHOD

### PARTICIPANTS

A convenience sample of 46 teenage boys and girls (26 boys, 20 girls) participated in this study. Participants were between the ages of 14 and 16 (average age = 15.09) and were of diverse ethnicity (43.5% Caucasian, 23.9% Asian/Asian American, 17.4% Latino/a, 10.9% African American, and 4.3% Other). The majority (89.1%) had been, or currently were, involved in a romantic (i.e., dating) relationship, and most (69.5%) had experienced some form of sexual activity (21.7% reported having engaged in sexual intercourse, and an additional 47.8% indicated having experienced other nonintercourse sexual activities).

### PROCEDURE

Participants were recruited from a large public high school in the greater Los Angeles area. The recruitment procedure was as follows. Upon receiving approval from the school principal, the researchers introduced themselves to students enrolled in randomly selected classes. They described the general nature of their study and solicited potential participants. Per university Institutional Review Board regulations, students interested in participating received a consent form to take home to their parent(s) or guardian(s). During the following week, students who received parental consent (and who themselves assented) to participate completed a questionnaire during their regularly scheduled lunch break or before or after school. To ensure privacy and anonymity of responses, students completed the measures individually in separate cubicles and did not provide any identifying information (e.g., names, school identification numbers) on their questionnaires.

The questionnaire contained 24 characteristics that have been used in previous partner preference research (e.g., Regan, 1998): *Physically attractive appearance, sense of humor, educated, popular, friendly, attentive to other people's needs, wealthy, good income or earning capacity, similar to you demographi-*

cally (race/ethnicity, family background, etc.), high social status, healthy, easy-going, sexually responsive, relaxed in social settings, similar to you in attitudes and values, intelligent, sexy appearance, has material possessions (nice car, clothing, etc.), sexually passionate, intellectual, similar to you in personality characteristics, cultured (knows about the arts, politics, etc.), high sex drive, and similar to you in interests and hobbies. These characteristics were presented in a previously determined random order for each participant and were evaluated on 9-point Likert-type scales.

Half of the participants were asked to indicate how much of the various attributes they desired in an "ideal long-term romantic partner," further defined as someone with whom they would form a committed relationship, such as a steady date. The other half evaluated the characteristics with regard to an "ideal short-term sexual partner," identified as someone with whom they would have an uncommitted, casual sexual relationship or encounter. This resulted in a 2 (Participant Sex) x 2 (Relationship Type: Romantic vs. Sexual) between subjects design. Participants were encouraged to ask questions about the meaning of the attribute items, the type of partner under consideration or the nature of the rating task if any arose.

After participants had completed the questionnaire, they provided demographic and relationship history information about themselves and subsequently were debriefed, thanked, and asked to refrain from discussing the study or their own responses with other potential participants.

## RESULTS

### CREATION OF ATTRIBUTE DIMENSIONS

In order to determine whether the 24 individual attribute items reflected a smaller set of underlying dimensions, a principal components analysis with varimax rotation was conducted on participants' ratings. This analysis revealed seven factors with eigenvalues greater than 1.0. Only items that loaded highly (greater than .45) and uniquely on each factor were retained. The first factor contained the characteristics "intelligent", "intellect", "cultured", "sense of humor", and "educated", and reflected the dimension of Intellect. The second factor reflected the predilection for an Interpersonally Skilled and Responsive partner, and included the attributes "relaxed in social settings", "friendly", "easy-going", and "attentive to other people's needs". The two items comprising the third factor - "physically attractive appearance" and "sexy appearance" -- described the preference for a partner with Physical Appeal. The items "sexually passionate", "high sex drive", and "sexually responsive" reflected the dimension of Sexual Drive. The fifth factor, labeled Similarity to Self, included the items "similar to you demographically", "similar to you in attitudes and values",

"similar to you in personality characteristics", and "similar to you in interests and hobbies". The sixth factor contained the attributes "popular" and "high social status" and reflected the dimension of Social Status. The final factor was labeled Material Wealth and included the items "wealthy", "has material possessions", and "good income or earning capacity". One item, "healthy", failed to load highly on any factor and thus was dropped from further analyses. Scores on each attribute dimension were created by averaging participants' responses to individual items comprising each of the seven factors.

#### **PARTNER PREFERENCES AS A FUNCTION OF PARTICIPANT SEX AND RELATIONSHIP TYPE**

To examine whether preferences differed as a function of participant sex and relationship type, a 2 (Participant Sex) x 2 (Relationship Type) multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) was conducted using the seven factor scores as dependent variables. This analysis revealed a multivariate main effect for Relationship Type (Pillai's  $V = .462$ ,  $F[7,36] = 4.42$ ,  $p < .005$ ). No other multivariate effects were found.

Univariate followup analyses of variance (ANOVAs) were then conducted on the factor scores. These analyses revealed three main effects for Relationship Type. As illustrated in Table 1, both adolescent boys and girls desired higher levels of attributes related to intellect in a long-term romantic partner than in a short-term sexual partner (7.83 vs. 6.12,  $F[1,42] = 19.75$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Conversely, they emphasized physically appealing attributes (8.37 vs. 7.46,  $F[1,42] = 7.31$ ,  $p < .05$ ) and characteristics reflective of sexual passion and drive (8.08 vs. 7.35,  $F[1,42] = 5.55$ ,  $p < .05$ ) more when considering a partner for a sexual liaison than when evaluating someone for a committed romantic relationship.

**TABLE 1**  
**PARTNER PREFERENCES AMONG ADOLESCENT BOYS AND GIRLS AS A FUNCTION OF RELATIONSHIP TYPE**

| Attribute Dimension                    | Romantic Partner | Sexual Partner |
|--|------------------|----------------|
| Intellect                              | 7.83*            | 6.14*          |
| Physical Appeal                        | 7.46*            | 8.37*          |
| Sexual Drive                           | 7.35*            | 8.09*          |
| Interpersonal Skill and Responsiveness | 7.21             | 7.63           |
| Material Wealth                        | 6.96             | 6.42           |
| Similarity to Self                     | 6.48             | 5.89           |
| Social Status                          | 5.80             | 6.02           |

\* Starred means in the same row are significantly different.  $F$  and  $p$  values are given in the text.

## DISCUSSION

The primary purpose of this study was to explore preferences for a range of partner attributes among adolescent boys and girls. An additional goal was to examine the extent to which sex and relationship context moderated these partner preferences.

No sex differences were found in preferences for any attribute dimension, which suggests that adolescent boys and girls share a similar conception of the "perfect" partner. However, relationship type clearly influenced these teenaged participants' evaluations. Specifically, when considering a partner for a long-term, romantic relationship, both boys and girls emphasized a variety of mental qualities, including humor, intellect, and intelligence. This result is in accord with earlier mate preference research conducted on adult samples (e.g., Hatfield & Sprecher, 1995; Regan, Levin, Sprecher, Christopher, & Cate, 2000). In romantic relationship contexts, a potential partner's ability to provide stimulating social interaction appears to be of paramount importance to adults and adolescents alike. Indeed, some theorists believe that these mental attributes may facilitate the process of pairbonding and relationship formation by establishing a basis for long-term, rewarding interpersonal contacts (see Regan, 2002; Rowatt et al., 1997).

Conversely, when considering a partner for a casual sexual relationship, both boys and girls emphasized external, physical attributes (e.g., attractiveness, sexy appearance). This result is similar to those reported in the adult preference literature (e.g., Kenrick, Groth, Trost, & Sadalla, 1993; Regan, 1998; Regan, Medina, & Joshi, 2001) and suggests that physical appeal is a highly important dimension in the evaluation and selection of short-term sexual partners. These participants also valued characteristics reflective of sexual passion and drive (e.g., sexual responsiveness and passion, high sex drive) in this type of relational partner. Interestingly, despite the existence of normative beliefs that sexuality is an inherent aspect of the male but not the female experience (e.g., Regan & Berscheid, 1995, 1999) and that men and boys have stronger and more frequent sexual desires than do women and girls (e.g., Richgels, 1992; Tolman, 1991), no sex differences were found with respect to preferences for these particular characteristics. Both boys and girls preferred that their potential short-term partners demonstrate sexual passion, be sexually responsive, and possess a high need for, and interest in, sex.

A few caveats to these results should be mentioned. Certainly the preferences that people express for particular partner attributes may have important implications for their behavior and for their relationships with actual and potential partners. However, it is also possible that there may be a significant difference between the preferences adolescents and young adults have with regard to poten-

tial – and hypothetical – partners and the choices they make and behaviors they demonstrate as they actually select and enter relationships with real-life partners. Similarly, although most of the participants in this study had engaged in some form of sexual activity and had been, or currently were, involved in romantic relationships, it is important to recognize that their preferences for various attributes may change as they make the transition from adolescence to young adulthood and gain additional sexual/romantic experience.

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