What if You Can't Get What You Want? Willingness to Compromise Ideal Mate Selection Standards as a Function of Sex, Mate Value, and Relationship Context

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The majority of mate selection research focuses on what people want, rather than what they will settle for, in a partner. The present study explored the extent to which sex, self-perceived mate value, and relationship context moderate ideal partner preferences and the willingness to compromise ideal standards. When considering a casual sex partner, men and women emphasized and were unwilling to compromise on physical attractiveness; when considering a romantic partner, both emphasized and refused to compromise on interpersonal responsiveness. Sex differences primarily occurred in the context of short-term mating, with women ideally seeking an older, more interpersonally responsive sex partner and demonstrating less willingness than men to compromise their standards on a number of dimensions. Men's mate value largely was disassociated with their selection criteria; women's mate value correlated positively with their ideal preferences across many characteristics and in both mating contexts.

Mate selection and interpersonal attraction research reveals a robust preference pattern such that, in general, men and women seek intelligent, honest, and emotionally stable partners who are attractive and who possess a "good" or "exciting" personality (e.g., Buss & Barnes, 1986; Howard, Blumstein, & Schwartz, 1987; Sprecher, Sullivan, & Hatfield, 1994). It is an unfortunate truth of human existence, however, that individuals cannot always obtain the kind of partner that they ideally desire. If humans were unwilling to deviate from their ideal standards—if, for example, we absolutely refused to consider less-than-perfect partners—little actual mating would take place. Thus, it is much more adaptive—from a personal, social, and evolutionary perspective—to take into account the constraints placed on mate choice by such variables as our own mate value, our relative freedom to pursue a partner, and the quality and quantity of available partners in the surrounding field and, consequently, to alter or compromise our ideal standards.

A creative field study conducted by Pennebaker and colleagues (1979) provides evidence that selection standards are, in fact, somewhat malleable. At three preselected times—9:00 p.m., 10:30 p.m., and midnight (half an hour before closing)—these researchers entered various drinking establishments near a college campus and asked randomly selected men and women to evaluate the attractiveness of the opposite- and same-sex individuals present at that time. Their results indicated that, as closing time neared and the period remaining to select, approach, and secure a partner decreased, the perceived attractiveness of opposite-sex (but not same-sex) bar patrons increased significantly. Assuming that those individuals actually did not alter their appearance over the course of the evening, this study certainly suggests that the selection criteria that men and women employ are not set in stone and that people can and do modify their standards as a function of various selection pressures (e.g., decision time).

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Indeed, a growing body of empirical work indicates that individuals may distinguish between the quality and/or quantity of characteristics that they ideally desire and those with which they would be satisfied in a potential partner. Some researchers have explored minimum selection standards (i.e., the lowest amount of various attributes that people find acceptable in potential partners). For example, Kenrick, Groth, Trost, and Sadalla (1993) and, more recently, Regan (1998) asked young adults to report their lowest levels of acceptability (in the form of percentile scores) for a variety of partner characteristics at different levels of relationship involvement. The results of both studies revealed that men and women generally expressed higher minimum standards as the relationship context shifted from short term (casual sex) to long term (romantic). In addition, women were more selective than men, particularly when considering a partner for casual sexual relations.

Other researchers have examined compromise in the form of the relative importance that individuals place on particular partner attributes. Cunningham, Barbee, and Pike (1990) and Cunningham, Druen, and Barbee (1997) have conducted several studies exploring the trade-offs that men and women make when faced with a choice between partners who possess different constellations of positive characteristics. They reported, for example, that both men and women selected individuals who combined physical attractiveness with a pleasing personality over those who possessed the mix of physical attractiveness and wealth or the combination of a pleasing personality and wealth. Similarly, a recent series of studies by Jensen-Campbell, Graziano, and West (1995) revealed that the impact of dominant behavior on a man's perceived dating desirability was moderated by his level of agreeableness. Specifically, women participants preferred dominant men, but only if they also demonstrated high levels of prosocial behavior.

In sum, men and women appear willing to modify their ideal criteria by establishing minimum standards for various attributes and by selectively choosing one characteristic or combination of characteristics over others. In addition, it is possible that preferences for a particular attribute are characterized by a range of latitude along which potential partners are allowed to vary. The basic premise of this article is that men and women seek partners whose attractiveness, sensitivity, intelligence, age, and so forth fall within certain acceptable parameters or absolute values. Individuals who fall outside of these designated markers—by having too much or too little of a given characteristic—are not considered viable candidates for mating relationships and are removed from the list of possible partners. Thus, the present study examined conceptions of the ideal or perfect mate and the extent to which men and women will allow a potential partner to deviate from this ideal standard. In addition, I examined three factors that are hypothesized to moderate young adults' ideal partner preferences and willingness to compromise: (a) sex (perhaps women's notion of the perfect partner is significantly different from that of men, and perhaps women are more or less willing to compromise their ideal standards), (b) relationship context (individuals may be more willing to compromise if they are seeking a casual sex partner as opposed to their future spouse or life partner), and (c) self-perceived mate value (high-value individuals—that is, those who possess high amounts of desirable attributes—may be less willing to compromise than low-value individuals).

Sex and Selection Standards

An important goal of this study was to examine whether sex moderates ideal partner preferences and the willingness to compromise ideal standards. Several theoretical perspectives predict that men and women will emphasize different characteristics when considering a potential mate. For example, evolutionary models focus on distal causal mechanisms that might influence partner preferences—evolved psychological heuristics that were selected because they overcame obstacles to reproduction located in the human ancestral past and therefore maximized gene replication and thus reproductive success. Several factors are posited to affect mate preferences, including the potential partner's physical or genetic fitness; his or her emotional fitness or willingness to invest in the reproductive partner, the reproductive relationship, and the resulting offspring; and paternity certainty or the estimated likelihood that offspring produced with a particular partner are indeed one's own (e.g., Buss, 1995; Cunningham et al., 1997; Gangestad & Simpson, 1990; Kenrick, 1994; Trivers, 1972). In addition, some features may be differentially important to each sex. For example, Trivers's (1972) parental investment model posits that women, who invest more direct physiological resources in their offspring than men (e.g., contributing body nutrients during pregnancy and lactation), will be more sensitive to resource limitations and thus particularly attentive to a potential mate's social status, which is presumably related to his ability to provide resources in the form of food, material possessions, and physical protection. Men, on the other hand, are assumed to be constrained by access to women who can produce viable offspring and thus should be relatively more sensitive than women to characteristics that reflect reproductive capacity (e.g., health and its presumed observable index, physical attractiveness, and youth).

Social context frameworks focus on proximal causal mechanisms—causes located in the contemporary social, cultural, and historical milieu—that may influence

receive for their sexual behavior, coupled with the existence of normative beliefs about male and female sexuality, encourage men to have relatively relaxed standards in a short-term mating context; such relaxed standards enhance the likelihood that they will procure a sex partner and increase their sexual experience, thus enabling them to conform to sociocultural expectations regarding masculinity. Those same social forces encourage women to maintain high standards when considering a short-term sexual liaison; such stringent standards allow them to exclude the majority of men from consideration and reduce the likelihood that they will find an acceptable short-term sex partner, thus lessening their risk of violating social norms about femininity.

Thus, a consideration of both proximal and distal causal mechanisms suggests that sex and relationship context will interact to influence selection standards. In general, men should be more willing to compromise their ideal standards when considering a casual sex partner than when evaluating a long-term romantic partner. Women, however, should extend no more latitude to their sex partners than to their romantic partners on the majority of characteristics. In addition, men should be more willing than women to compromise when considering a casual sexual partner; these sex differences, however, should disappear or become attenuated when the relationship is long term and romantic in nature. The one predicted exception to this pattern of results concerns the dimension of physical attractiveness. Specifically, due to the presumed evolutionary and social significance of physical attractiveness for male mating choices, men's attractiveness standards are expected to remain constant across contexts (i.e., men will be willing to compromise on all dimensions but attractiveness when considering a potential casual sex partner).

Perceived Mate Value and Selection Standards

In addition to sex and relationship context, another variable that is likely to moderate people's willingness to compromise ideal standards is their own mate value. According to social exchange or equity models of relationship formation (e.g., Blau, 1964; Murstein, 1976; Walster, Walster, & Berscheid, 1978), the process of heterosexual mate selection resembles a stock market (Cameron, Oskamp, & Sparks, 1977), in which male and female players attempt to maximize their rewards and make social interaction as profitable as possible by exchanging their own assets for desirable attributes in a partner. Assuming that we all seek the best possible value in a potential mate, individuals with high amounts of desired characteristics will pair with others of equally high value, and persons with lower value inevitably will form liaisons with similarly "poor" others. Thus, this process results in the pairing of individuals of roughly equal value. Mistakes are costly. For example, in his discussion of the early stages of marital choice, Murstein (1970) notes that although an individual may run less risk of rejection by seeking a less desirable partner (low cost), the rewards of such a conquest are correspondingly low (low profit); at the same time, the increased likelihood of rejection (high cost) associated with seeking a partner who is significantly more desirable than oneself (high profit) renders this enterprise equally risky. Consequently, an accurate perception of one's own value is important.

Although evolutionary models tend to focus on sex as a crucial moderator of mate selection preferences, they nonetheless also suggest that mate value ought to moderate selection criteria (e.g., Kenrick, 1994; Sloman & Sloman, 1988; Wright, 1994). Specifically, evolutionary theorists assume that men and women, in the service of maximizing their chances of reproductive success, will seek mates with the most desirable qualities. However, each mate seeker is not as desirable as the next (e.g., a fairly attractive individual with moderate resources is not as ideal a partner as a very attractive individual with many resources; therefore, he or she will be less likely to attract highly desirable partners who are themselves seeking to maximize reproductive success). Therefore, the ability to accurately assess one's own mate value is adaptive insofar as (a) it prevents individuals from expending energy, time, and resources while competing for highly valuable mates that they have little chance of attracting and retaining, and (b) it reduces the likelihood that individuals will squander their own resources on less valuable mates who will compromise the seekers' ability to produce viable offspring.

In addition, self-assessments pertaining to mate value might be more important to one sex than to the other in moderating choice of potential mates. For example, as discussed previously, the social and evolutionary costs of short-term mating are significantly higher for women than for men. Therefore, mate value is hypothesized to be positively correlated with ideal preferences and negatively correlated with willingness to compromise ideal standards, particularly for women and particularly in the context of casual sex.

METHOD

Participants

The sample consisted of 72 (32 men, 40 women; average age = 18.9 years) undergraduate students who participated for course credit. They were Caucasian (56.9%), Latino/a (15.3%), Asian (13.9%), and African American (13.9%). All were heterosexual, and the ma-

TABLE 2: Ideal Partner Percentile Ratings as a Function of Participant Sex and Relationship Context

Dimension	Participant Sex		Relationship Context	
	Men	*Women*	*Sexual*	*Romantic*
Physical attractiveness	87.2	84.8	87.7_a	84.0_a
Interpersonal skill and responsiveness	77.1_a	81.8_a	76.4_b	83.1_b
Intellect	68.5	73.3	64.1	78.2
Social status	65.5	66.1	64.0	67.7
Interpersonal power	61.3	58.4	59.9	59.5
Family orientation	52.0	58.7	40.8_a	70.6_a
Age[a]	0.9_a	2.4_a	2.0_b	1.5_b

NOTE: Means with the same subscript in each row are significantly different (p values are given in the text).
a. Age values are given in years, not percentile scores, and reflect the average number of years greater than or less than (here, greater than) the participants' own age that is considered ideal.

RESULTS

Creation of Attribute Dimensions

The first step in data analysis was to explore whether the characteristics to which participants responded reflected underlying, meaningful attribute dimensions. A principal components analysis (varimax rotation) conducted on participants' percentile ratings in each condition (sex vs. romantic) revealed six factors that collectively accounted for 67% of the total variance in casual sex partner preferences and 64% of the total variance in long-term romantic partner preferences. To ensure comparability of measures across conditions, only items that loaded highly (.40 or higher) and uniquely on the same factor in each analysis were retained. Specifically, the first factor contains the characteristics of relaxed in social settings, good sense of humor, easygoing, friendly, and attentive to partner's needs and reflects the dimension of interpersonal skill and responsiveness ($\alpha = .82$). The second factor reflects the predilection for an intellectual partner and includes the characteristics of intellectual, cultured, intelligent, and educated ($\alpha = .82$). The three items comprising the third factor—physically attractive, sexy, and healthy—describe a preference for physical attractiveness ($\alpha = .76$). The fourth factor, labeled social status, includes the characteristics of high social status, popular, material possessions, wealthy, and good earning capacity ($\alpha = .83$). The fifth factor contains the characteristics of powerful, dominant, aggressive, and creative and artistic and describes the dimension of interpersonal power ($\alpha = .70$). The final factor is labeled family orientation and includes the items of religious, ambitious, and wants children ($\alpha = .68$). Items that failed to load on the same factor across conditions or that did not load highly on any one factor were dropped. These included self-confident, good housekeeper, emotionally stable, good heredity, honest and trustworthy, exciting personality, and kind and understanding.

Ideal Partner Ratings as a Function of Participant Sex and Relationship Context

To examine whether ideal partner preferences differed as a function of participant sex and relationship context, scores on each factor were subjected to a repeated measures analysis of variance (ANOVA); participant sex served as the between-participants variable and relationship context served as the within-participants variable. These analyses revealed one main effect for participant sex and three main effects for relationship context; no interactions were found. Specifically, as illustrated in Table 2, women placed greater emphasis on interpersonal skill and responsiveness than did men when considering an ideal partner, $F(1, 70) = 4.94$, $p < .05$. Both sexes expected an ideal romantic partner to score higher than a casual sex partner on interpersonal skill and responsiveness, $F(1, 70) = 4.94$, $p < .05$, and family orientation, $F(1, 70) = 211.35$, $p < .001$; however, the perfect casual sex partner was expected to be significantly more physically attractive than the perfect romantic partner, $F(1, 70) = 8.11$, $p < .01$.

A similar analysis on age preferences for the ideal partner also revealed sex, $F(1, 70) = 15.78$, $p < .001$, and relationship context, $F(1, 70) = 6.32$, $p < .05$, main effects. Both sexes preferred their partners to be older than themselves, but women preferred an older partner than did men—for casual sex partner: 2.6 vs. 1.3 years older, $t(70) = -2.67$, $p < .05$; for romantic partner: 2.3 vs. .4 years older, $t(70) = -4.46$, $p < .001$. In addition, women's ideal sexual partner was roughly the same number of years older in comparison to their own age (2.6 years older) as their ideal romantic partner (2.3 years older); however, men's ideal sex partner was significantly older than their ideal romantic partner—1.3 vs. .4 years older, $t(31) = -2.29$, $p < .05$.

Willingness to Compromise as a Function of Participant Sex and Relationship Context

As before, a series of repeated measures ANOVAs was used to examine whether participants' willingness to compromise their ideal preferences (as indicated by the average percentile amount that they allowed their partners to vary on a given factor) differed as a function of their sex and the relationship context. These analyses revealed three main effects for participant sex; women were less willing than men to compromise on the do-

to deviate from ideal standards than their romantic partners. These results are consistent with the finding that casual sex provides men, but not women, with the opportunity to demonstrate sexual prowess and fulfill normative peer group expectations (e.g., Regan & Dreyer, in press); men significantly compromise their ideal standards because such compromises increase the likelihood of finding an acceptable partner for casual sex. Similarly, although men's self-perceived mate value generally was disassociated with their ideal preferences and willingness to compromise, women's self-assessments on most dimensions (e.g., intellect, family orientation) were strongly related to their ideal standards for a casual sex partner (and for a romantic partner as well).

However, a number of expected sex differences were not found. First, the results of this study generally did not confirm the hypothesis that women would emphasize social status attributes more than men. Women were less willing than men to compromise on social status and characteristics presumably related to social position (i.e., interpersonal power, age). However, aside from a clear preference for an older partner, they did not emphasize these dimensions more than did men when evaluating their ideal mate. Further muddying the water is the finding that status preferences appeared to be yoked to self-assessments for both sexes. The higher a participant's self-appraised social status, the more exacting were his or her standards on the same dimension with respect to a potential romantic (and, for women, sexual) partner. Both sexes apparently demand long-term mates who are at least equal to their own current or estimated social status.

The results also failed to confirm the hypothesis that men would emphasize personal appearance attributes more than would women. Across relationships contexts, men neither attached greater importance to attractiveness nor were less willing to compromise on attractiveness than were women. In addition, although no specific prediction was made about women's attractiveness criteria, the women in this study accepted less variability on this dimension from their sex partners than from their romantic partners. This result, although unexpected, is in accord with earlier research on female sexual desire and mate preferences. For example, a man's physical attractiveness is perceived by both sexes as the single most important cause of female sexual desire (Regan & Berscheid, 1995), a physically attractive appearance is the characteristic preferred most by women when considering a potential sex partner (Regan & Berscheid, 1997), and women hold higher minimum attractiveness standards for a casual sex partner than for a long-term, romantic partner (Regan, 1998). Attractiveness clearly plays a much larger role in women's short-term mating preferences than theoretically has been supposed.

In fact, the sexes in general were far more similar than they were different in terms of their selection standards. When considering a casual sex partner, both men and women emphasized and were least willing to compromise on physical attractiveness, and both were most willing to compromise on social status and intellect. This suggests that casual sex partners are primarily selected on the basis of external physical attributes, rather than by any ability to provide resources or mental stimulation. With respect to a long-term romantic partner, both men and women focused on interpersonal skill/responsiveness and attractiveness, were least willing to compromise on the dimension of interpersonal skill and responsiveness, and were again most willing to compromise with respect to social status. In long-term mating contexts, such material attributes as possessions, wealth, high social status, and earning capacity are less important than a potential partner's ability to provide emotional warmth and to create and sustain positive social interaction.

Taken together, these results suggest that no one theoretical perspective completely captures the dynamics of human mate selection. Attachment-based evolutionary theories (e.g., Rowatt et al., 1997; Zeifman & Hazan, 1997), which focus on the adaptive value of selecting mates who can provide the sustained emotional and social support necessary for successful pair-bonding and raising of offspring, seem best able to predict and explain men's and women's long-term partner preferences. Parental investment-based evolutionary theories (e.g., Buss & Schmitt, 1993; Kenrick et al., 1993) and social context theories (e.g., Gagnon & Simon, 1973; Mischel, 1966; Reiss, 1981) seem particularly suited to predicting and explaining short-term mating preferences—or, rather, men's short-term mating preferences. Neither perspective comprehensively accounts for the importance placed by women on attractiveness in casual sex partners and the relative unimportance given to social status attributes. Interestingly, Darwin himself predicted this pattern, suggesting that when existing environmental conditions create the opportunity to choose from among an array of potential mates, both sexes will select partners "not for mental charms, or property, or social position, but almost solely from external appearance" (1871, p. 368). Although Darwin did not speculate as to the adaptive significance of this preference for beauty, it is certainly the case that in modern, industrialized societies, the physical and social environments are such that both men and women have considerable—and considerably more equal—powers of selection (e.g., mobility increases access to potential mates, economic opportunities for women reduce the need to select mates based primarily on financial considerations, decreased social sanctions against divorce and premarital sexual activity allow the opportunity for multiple pairings). This

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