

PARTNER PREFERENCES AMONG HOMOSEXUAL MEN AND WOMEN: WHAT IS DESIRABLE IN A SEX PARTNER IS NOT NECESSARILY DESIRABLE IN A ROMANTIC PARTNER

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The present study examined the degree to which various partner characteristics are preferred by homosexual men and women in a short-term sexual relationship versus a long-term romantic relationship. A non-college sample of adults ($N = 80$) individually rated the desirability of various attributes in a "short-term sexual" or a "long-term romantic" partner (randomly assigned). The results indicated that participants clearly distinguished between these two types of relational partner. Specifically, and consistent with hypotheses, both men and women emphasized internal mental attributes (e.g., intellect), prosocial personality characteristics (e.g., interpersonal sensitivity, responsiveness) and characteristics reflective of family orientation (e.g., desire for children) more in a long-term romantic, than in a short-term sexual, partner. Conversely, and consistent with earlier work using heterosexual samples, men and women desired higher levels of physical appeal (e.g., physical attractiveness, sexy appearance) from a potential sex partner than from a potential romantic partner. Sex differences also were found. Men desired honesty and trustworthiness from a short-term sex partner more than did women, and women valued a long-term romantic partner's family orientation more than did men.

For decades, scholars from a variety of disciplines have been interested in the traits men and women desire in potential mates, in part because such preferences have implications for people's behavior and their interpersonal relationships. The majority of research on mate selection has focused on the preferences of heterosexual populations, and reveals that most men and women desire intelligent, honest, emotionally stable partners who are attractive and who possess a "good" or "exciting" personality (e.g., Regan & Berscheid, 1997; Sprecher Sullivan & Hatfield, 1994). *Nonheterosexual* populations generally have been excluded from empirical investigation, despite the fact that the preferences of homosexu-

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al men and women provide important insight into universal mating dynamics and the evolved nature of the human mind. With rare exception (e.g., Howard, Blumstein & Schwartz, 1987), those researchers who have included homosexual participants have focused on preferences for only one or a very small number of partner attributes (e.g., age; Hayes, 1995; Kenrick, Keefe, Bryan, Barr, & Brown, 1995; Laner, 1979; Over & Phillips, 1997; Silverthorne & Quinsey, 2000) and/or have sampled from specialized populations whose responses may not generalize to the wider community (e.g., personals advertisers; Deaux & Hanna, 1984; Hatala & Prehodka, 1996; Laner & Kamel, 1977; Lee, 1976). Thus, the present study expanded upon previous research by examining preferences for a wide range of partner attributes and by utilizing a more representative sample of homosexual adults. In addition, because desires may shift as a function of the type of relationship under consideration, an experimental manipulation was included that allowed preferences for a short-term sexual partner to be compared with those for a long-term romantic partner.

Very few researchers have investigated whether preferences among homosexual men and women shift as a function of relationship context. However, a consideration of previous theory and empirical work conducted with heterosexual samples suggests that this variable (i.e., whether the interpersonal context is short-term and sexual in nature or long-term and romantic in nature) should be an important moderator of the partner preferences of homosexual men and women. For example, evolutionary models of human mate selection are based upon the principles of natural and sexual selection originally articulated by Darwin (e.g., 1859). These models consider the ways in which mating behavior might be influenced by evolved psychological heuristics that were selected because they overcame obstacles to reproduction located in the human ancestral past and therefore maximized gene replication and reproductive success in that earlier environment (see Tooby & Cosmides, 1992). Although these models give primacy to the act and genetic consequences of ancestral reproduction (and, by inference, to heterosexuality), they also can be applied usefully to the mating preferences and choices of homosexual men and women. That is, evolutionary models assume that the reproductive decisions made by our ancestors (and the outcomes of those decisions) contributed to the evolution of a mating psychology that is the legacy of all contemporary humans, irrespective of their sexual orientation.

In addition, these models posit that four broad classes of attribute affect the partner preferences, choices, and relationship outcomes of contemporary men and women, including: (1) the potential partner's *physical or genetic fitness*; (2) his or her *emotional fitness* or willingness to invest in the reproductive partner, the reproductive relationship, and resulting offspring; (3) his or her *relational fitness* or ability to become exclusively attached to one particular individual and to

confine reproductively-relevant behaviors to the primary relationship; and (4) his or her *social fitness* or ability to negotiate the social hierarchy and provide tangible resources for the relational partner and offspring (e.g., Buss & Kenrick, 1998; Cunningham, Druen, & Barbee, 1997; Gangestad & Simpson, 1990; Regan, in press). Some of these attributes are presumed to become particularly important in different relational contexts. For example, internal, personality attributes (e.g., honesty, trustworthiness, kindness) that reflect the ability to sustain positive interactions over time may be of paramount importance when considering a potential long-term partner. When evaluating a potential short-term sexual partner, however, external attributes (e.g., physical appearance) may be of primary importance.

Research with heterosexual samples generally supports these theoretical suppositions. For example, Regan and Berscheid (1997) found that a physically attractive appearance was the characteristic most preferred by men and women when considering a casual sex partner. Similar results have been reported by Kenrick, Groth, Trost and Sadalla (1993) and Regan (1998). Conversely, intelligence, honesty, and other positive, internal attributes are emphasized by heterosexual respondents of both sexes when considering long-term (e.g., marital) relationship partners (e.g., Regan, Levin, Sprecher, Christopher, & Cate, 2000). Work with homosexual respondents, although sparse, yields similar findings (e.g., Howard, Blumstein & Schwartz, 1987). Thus, it was hypothesized that participants would focus upon internal or dispositional attributes in the long-term relational context and upon external or physical characteristics in the short-term sexual context.

METHOD

PARTICIPANTS

A convenience sample of 80 self-reported homosexual men and women (40 men, 40 women) voluntarily participated in this study. Participants were between the ages of 18 and 48 (average age = 28.70 years) and were of diverse ethnicity (38.8% Latino/a, 36.3% Caucasian, 13.8% Asian/Asian American, 3.8% African American, 2.5% Asian Indian, 1.3% Middle Eastern, 1.3% Native American/American Indian, and 2.5% Other). The majority (86.3%) were sexually experienced, and 46.3% currently were involved in a romantic relationship.

PROCEDURE

The participant sample for this study was obtained from several coffee shops and clubs located in the greater Los Angeles area and known to have a primarily homosexual clientele (e.g., via advertisements in gay newsletters and postings at university campus lesbian/gay/bisexual unions). Specifically, during mid-

afternoon on several successive weekends, the second author and her male research assistant approached individuals seated alone or in small groups (no more than three people) at the various establishments. She identified herself, explained that she was conducting a questionnaire study about people's preferences for different types of partner, and asked if they were interested in participating. Those who responded affirmatively received (and signed) a consent form detailing the study procedure as well as a questionnaire. The questionnaire contained 25 characteristics that have been used in previous partner preference research (e.g., Regan & Berscheid, 1997): *Attractive physical appearance, good sense of humor, self-confident, popular, friendly, kind and understanding, wealthy, emotionally stable, religious, educated, healthy, high social status, relaxed in social settings, honest and trustworthy, intelligent, sexy, college graduate, creative and artistic, good housekeeper, intellectual, good earning capacity, desire for children, access to material possessions, good heredity, and expressive.* These characteristics were presented in a previously determined random order for each participant and were evaluated on a 1 *not at all desirable* to 9 *extremely desirable* Likert-type scale.

Half of the participants were asked to rate the characteristics in terms of how desirable they were in a short-term or casual sexual partner; the other half evaluated the characteristics with regard to a long-term or committed romantic partner (randomly assigned). This resulted in a 2 (Participant Sex) x 2 (Relationship Type: Sexual vs. romantic) between subjects design. After participants individually completed the rating task, they provided demographic information about themselves (e.g., sexual orientation, age, relationship status) 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

The first step in the data analysis was to explore whether the characteristics to which participants responded reflected underlying, meaningful attribute dimensions. A principal components analysis with varimax rotation conducted on participants' ratings revealed six factors with eigen values greater than 1.0. Only items that loaded highly (greater than .45) and uniquely on each factor were retained. Specifically, the first factor contained the characteristics "wealthy," "access to material possessions," "good earning capacity," and "high social status," and reflected the dimension of *Social Status* ($\alpha = .84$). The second factor

reflected the predilection for a *Physically Appealing* partner, and included the characteristics "attractive physical appearance," "sexy," and "healthy" ($\alpha = .78$). The four items comprising the third factor – "intelligent," "intellectual," "educated," and "college graduate"—described the preference for a partner with *Intellect* ($\alpha = .80$). The fourth factor, labeled *Family Orientation*, included the characteristics "good heredity," "good housekeeper," "religious," and "desire for children" ($\alpha = .74$). The fifth factor contained the attributes "honest and trustworthy" and "kind and understanding," and reflected the dimension of *Interpersonal Sensitivity* ($\alpha = .80$). The sixth and final factor was labeled *Expressiveness/Responsivity* and included the items "expressive," "good sense of humor," "friendly," and "relaxed in social settings" ($\alpha = .85$). Four items, "creative and artistic," "self-confident," "popular," and "emotionally stable," failed to load highly on any factor and thus were dropped from further analyses. Scores on each attribute dimension were created by averaging participants' responses to individual items comprising each of the six 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, the authors conducted a 2 (Participant Sex) x 2 (Relationship Type) multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) using the six factor scores as dependent variables. This analysis revealed multivariate main effects for Participant Sex (Pillai's $V = .217$, $F[6,71] = 3.28$, $p < .01$) and Relationship Type (Pillai's $V = .708$, $F[6,71] = 26.64$, $p < .001$), as well as a multivariate Sex x Relationship Type interaction (Pillai's $V = .226$, $F[6,71] = 3.45$, $p < .01$).

A series of univariate followup analyses of variance (ANOVAs) revealed one main effect for Participant Sex, with women placing slightly greater emphasis on a partner's family orientation than men did (4.67 vs. 4.14, $F[1,76] = 5.10$, $p < .05$). Several main effects for Relationship Type also were found. As expected, both sexes believed that interpersonal sensitivity (8.45 vs. 5.89, $F[1,76] = 127.53$, $p < .001$), family orientation (5.64 vs. 3.17, $F[1,76] = 62.39$, $p < .001$), intellect (6.83 vs. 4.70, $F[1,76] = 48.51$, $p < .001$), and expressiveness/responsivity (7.32 vs. 6.34, $F[1,76] = 15.19$, $p < .001$) were more desirable in a long-term romantic partner than in a short-term sexual partner. Conversely, and also as predicted, both men and women emphasized physically appealing attributes (e.g., attractiveness, sexiness; 7.68 vs. 6.72, $F[1,76] = 17.45$, $p < .001$) more when considering a partner for a sexual liaison than when evaluating someone for a committed romantic relationship.

Four of these main effects were qualified by significant univariate Participant Sex x Relationship Type interactions ($F[1,76] = 12.82$, $p < .005$ for the Family Orientation composite; $F[1,76] = 11.29$, $p < .005$ for the Interpersonal Sensitivity

TABLE 1
PARTNER PREFERENCES (DESIRABILITY RATINGS) AS A FUNCTION OF PARTICIPANT SEX AND RELATIONSHIP TYPE

Attribute Dimension	Short-term Sex Partner		Long-term Romantic Partner	
	Women	Men	Women	Men
Physical Appeal	7.80 _a	7.57	6.32 _c	7.12
Expressiveness/Responsivity	6.83 _b	6.31	7.55 _b	7.09
Social Status	5.75	5.35	5.79	4.86
Interpersonal Sensitivity	5.25 _c	6.53 _a	8.58 _a	8.33 _a
Intellect	4.48 _d	4.93 _c	7.23 _b	6.43 _b
Family Orientation	2.88 _d	3.46 _c	6.46 _b	4.81 _b

Note: Means with the same subscript in each row are significantly different (all $ps < .005$).

factor; $F[1,76] = 4.99, p < .05$ for the Physical Appeal dimension; and $F[1,76] = 4.20, p < .05$ for the Intellect factor). To explore the nature of these interactions, the authors conducted a series of Bonferroni-protected comparisons (a family-wise error rate of .05 was established to guard against Type I error inflation). As illustrated in Table 1, these analyses revealed that both sexes considered attributes related to sensitivity (for women, 8.58 vs. 5.25, $t[38] = 10.39$; for men, 8.33 vs. 6.53, $t[38] = 5.59$; $ps < .005$), intellect (for women, 7.23 vs. 4.48, $t[38] = 6.62$; for men, 6.43 vs. 4.93, $t[38] = 3.36$; $ps < .005$), and family orientation (for women, 6.46 vs. 2.88, $t[38] = 7.93$; for men, 4.81 vs. 3.46, $t[38] = 3.13$; $ps < .005$) to be more desirable in a long-term romantic partner than in a short-term sex partner. In addition, men emphasized more than did women interpersonal sensitivity attributes (e.g., trust, honesty) when considering a short-term sexual partner (6.53 vs. 5.25, $t[38] = 3.16, p < .005$); women emphasized more than did men family orientation features when evaluating a potential long-term romantic partner (6.46 vs. 4.81, $t[38] = -3.51, p < .005$). And finally, women – but not men – desired physical attributes (e.g., attractiveness, sexiness, health) more in a sexual partner than in a romantic partner (7.80 vs. 6.32, $t[38] = -3.94, p < .005$), and expressiveness/responsivity attributes (e.g., friendliness, humor) more in a romantic partner than in a sexual partner (7.55 vs. 6.83, $t[38] = 3.59, p < .005$).

DISCUSSION

The primary purpose of this study was to systematically explore homosexual men's and women's preferences for a range of partner attributes. An additional goal was to examine the extent to which relationship context and sex might moderate participants' evaluations.

The results indicated that relationship type was an important moderator of partner preferences, with both men and women differentiating strongly between short-term sexual and long-term romantic relationship partners. Specifically,

when considering a partner for a casual or short-term sexual liaison, both men and women emphasized attributes related to physical appeal (e.g., physical attractiveness, sexy appearance, healthy); in fact, these were the most desired attributes overall in this type of relational partner, for both sexes. This result supports those reported in earlier investigations of heterosexual preferences (e.g., Kenrick et al. 1993; Regan et al. 2000) and suggests that short-term sex partners are selected primarily on the basis of external, physical characteristics. With respect to a long-term, romantic partner, however, the participants focused on attributes related to interpersonal sensitivity (e.g., kindness and understanding, honesty and trustworthiness) and responsiveness (e.g., expressiveness, friendliness), as well as intellect (e.g., intelligence). In long-term relationship contexts, a potential partner's ability to provide emotional support and stimulating social interaction appear to be of paramount importance. By establishing a basis for long-term, positive interpersonal contacts, such prosocial attributes may facilitate pair bonding and contribute to relationship quality and stability.

For the most part, the preferences of men and women were very similar. However, the results did reveal two sex differences. The first was that women focused more than did men on a potential long-term partner's orientation toward home and family. Insofar as such traditionally "hearth and home" attributes encompass aspects of the female sex role stereotype (Eagly, 1987), it makes sense that lesbian women would seek these from their potential (female) partners more than gay men would from their potential (male) partners. Indeed, Gonzales and Meyers (1993) found that the personals advertisements placed by homosexual and heterosexual women were more likely to contain appeals for nurturance, faithfulness, commitment-orientation, and other attributes indicative of a stereotypically feminine and/or domestic focus than were those placed by their male counterparts. Similarly, an earlier study conducted by Deaux and Hanna (1984) also found that a higher proportion of homosexual women than men asked for a partner with an orientation toward commitment, home, and family in their personals advertisements.

The second sex difference concerned attributes related to interpersonal sensitivity. Men were more concerned than women with a potential sex partner's honesty and trustworthiness, and kindness and understanding. This sex difference is understandable in the light of increasing rates of HIV infection within the gay male community and a corresponding need to know a potential partner's HIV status. Indeed, Davidson's (1991) content analysis of personals advertisements placed by gay men over a 10-year period reveals a growing focus on self and other's current state of physical health, with men in the late 1980s being much more likely to mention health status (e.g., HIV negative, AIDS-free) and to request sexual exclusivity (e.g., monogamous) from their potential partners than were men placing advertisements a decade earlier (see also Hatala, Baack, &

Parmenter, 1998). More recent research also finds that gay men are more likely to mention their HIV status than are lesbian women in their personals advertisements (Hatala & Prehodka, 1996).

In conclusion several limitations and caveats to the present investigation must be noted. For example, this study examined men's and women's preferences for two types of relational partner. It is important to recognize, however, that other types of relationship exist and are experienced by individuals during their lifetimes. The results are limited to the two types included in the experimental manipulation. In addition, although the desires people express for particular partner attributes undoubtedly have important implications for their behavior and for their ongoing interpersonal relationships, it is possible that there may be a significant difference between the preferences men and women have with regard to potential – and hypothetical – partners, and the choices they make and behaviors they demonstrate as they actually select, and enter relationships with, real-life partners.

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