

Preferred Level of Sexual Experience in a Date or Mate: The Merger of Two Methodologies

Susan Sprecher, Ph.D.
Illinois State University

Pamela C. Regan, Ph.D.
California State University—Los Angeles

Kathleen McKinney, Ph.D.
Kellye Maxwell, M.S.
Robert Wazienski, Ph.D.
Illinois State University

Using evolutionary and sociological models, we predicted how much sexual experience was desired by men and women for a casual dating relationship versus a marital relationship. We used a combined mate-selection questionnaire and experimental paradigm to examine more systematically men's and women's (N = 436) desires for different levels of sexual experience in a potential partner. When rating either a casual dating or a marital partner, participants gave higher desirability ratings to chastity than to either moderate or extensive sexual experience; furthermore, moderate sexual experience was perceived as more desirable than extensive sexual experience. Contrary to our predictions, no gender differences in desirability ratings were found for the various levels of sexual experience. We also examined how sociosexual orientation (i.e., degree of sexual permissiveness; see Simpson & Gangestad, 1991a) might be related to desirability ratings for sexual (in)experience in a partner within each gender. Unrestricted (i.e., permissive) women gave higher desirability ratings than did restricted women to moderate and considerable levels of sexual experience, whereas restricted women gave higher desirability ratings to chastity than did unrestricted women. For men, sociosexual orientation was unrelated to preferences for sexual experience in a partner.

Researchers in the areas of mate selection and interpersonal attraction have conducted numerous empirical investigations in an attempt to delineate the attributes, traits, and characteristics that men and women desire in their romantic partners (e.g., Buss & Barnes, 1986; DeSrochers, 1995; Regan & Berscheid, 1997; Sprecher, 1989; Townsend & Levy, 1990). Such preferences undoubtedly have implications for people's behavior and their relationships with actual and potential mates. For example, men and women may actively attempt to initiate relationships with those individuals who possess certain desirable characteristics, and avoid or terminate relationships with individuals who fail to meet these selection criteria.

The majority of mate-selection and interpersonal attraction research has been focused upon the perceived desirability of various personality traits (e.g., intelligence, exciting personality) or other individual attributes (e.g., social status, physical attractiveness)

and generally reveals that men and women seek many of the same characteristics in their potential partners. Not surprisingly, however, robust gender differences have also been reported, such that men express greater preference for a physically attractive partner than do women, and women value earning potential, social status characteristics, and certain personal attributes (e.g., kindness) more than do men (e.g., Buss & Schmitt, 1993; Sprecher, Sullivan, & Hatfield, 1994; Wiederman & Allgeier, 1992). An individual's sexual history (e.g., past or present sexual behavior, level of sexual experience) may also influence his or her desirability as a dating and/or marriage partner, but little empirical attention has been given to delineating the role that such sexual history characteristics may play in determining partner desirability. In the current study, we used a combination of two methods commonly employed in the existing attraction literature—descriptive survey (i.e., mate-selection list) and experimental

person perception paradigms—to examine how various levels of sexual experience in a hypothetical partner are desired differently by men versus women. We were also interested in examining whether participants' sociosexual orientation (i.e., degree of sexual permissiveness) might explain within-gender variation in the desirability ratings for different levels of sexual experience in a partner.

Review of Previous Literature

The few researchers who have examined preferences for sexual experience versus inexperience (i.e., chastity) in a partner have used one of two methodological strategies. Specifically, some researchers have employed a descriptive survey or

A portion of the data presented in this article was included in the master's thesis of the fourth author, with the direction of the first and third authors. Address correspondence to Susan Sprecher, Ph.D., Department of Sociology and Anthropology, Illinois State University, Normal, IL 61790-4660. E-mail: SPRECHER@ILSTU.EDU.

“mate-selection questionnaire” (Feingold, 1990) design in which participants indicate how much they desire various traits in a partner, including virginity or sexual experience (e.g., Buss, 1989; Hill, 1945). Other researchers have used an experimental person perception design in which participants receive sexual background information about a target individual (whose sexual history is manipulated to range, for example, from complete inexperience to extensive experience) and then provide attraction or desirability ratings for that individual (e.g., Sprecher, McKinney, & Orbuch, 1991).

Mate-selection questionnaire studies. Results from mate-selection questionnaire studies generally reveal that men and women do not consider a potential partner’s level of sexual experience to be as important as many other characteristics or traits (e.g., dependable character, physical attractiveness, ambition). For example, in an early investigation, Hill (1945) examined the perceived importance of “chastity,” defined as no previous intercourse experience. Chastity ranked 10th in importance, followed by 8 other traits, including intelligence, sociability, and good looks. More recent empirical work suggests that chastity may have declined in perceived importance relative to other traits. Hoyt and Hudson (1981) distributed Hill’s (1945) mate-selection list and found that chastity had declined in relative importance more than any other trait: Out of the 18-item list, chastity was rated 17th in importance by women and 18th by men. Similarly, Buss (1989) asked participants from 33 countries to rank a variety of traits, including chastity, in terms of importance; the data from the U.S. sample revealed that men and women viewed a lack of previous sexual intercourse experience as unimportant relative to other traits. Although Buss (1989) reported a small gender difference in his U.S. sample, such that men evaluated chastity more favorably than women did in a potential partner,

neither Hill (1945) nor Hoyt and Hudson (1981) found gender differences. In general, then, these studies suggest that chastity is considered less important in a potential partner than other characteristics, and that men and women agree about its degree of (un)importance.

Additional research using the mate-selection questionnaire paradigm has been conducted on preferences for other characteristics related to sexual experience level. For example, Buss and Schmitt (1993) summarized results from a set of studies in which they examined preferences for such sexual history attributes as “promiscuous.” Although both men and women viewed promiscuity as undesirable in a long-term mate, women perceived this characteristic to be more undesirable in a short-term partner than did men. Similarly, Regan and Berscheid (1997) reported that both men and women preferred a “sexually available (“easy”)” short-term partner more than they preferred a marriage partner with that characteristic. These authors noted that no gender differences were found with respect to preferences for sexual availability in a potential marital partner (in fact, this attribute was the lowest ranked in the list for both genders); however, men ranked sexual availability significantly higher than women did when considering a potential sexual partner.

In sum, the results from those mate-selection questionnaire studies conducted over the past 50 years that have included an item about sexual experience suggest that chastity once may have been perceived as somewhat important and desirable (relative to other traits) but that this attribute is now viewed as relatively unimportant. However, individuals do not necessarily prefer a partner with considerable sexual experience (although preferences for sexual experience have not received as much empirical attention as have preferences for sexual *inexperience*). In addition, the results across studies have been inconsistent concerning gender differences in

preference for sexual (in)experience.

Experimental person perception studies. Results from experimental person perception studies indicate that extensive sexual experience is perceived to be less desirable in a mate than is low or moderate sexual experience. For example, Jacoby and Williams (1985) provided men and women with information about an other-sex target who had high (sexual intercourse), moderate (some petting), or low (none) levels of lifetime sexual experience. The target with moderate experience was preferred more than the other two targets as both a dating and marriage partner. Similarly, Sprecher et al. (1991) asked men and women to evaluate the dating, friendship, and marriage desirability of either a male or a female target who engaged in low, moderate, or high levels of sexual activity in his or her current relationship. Overall, the target with the lowest level of sexual activity received the highest friendship and marriage desirability ratings. However, the moderately and highly experienced targets were perceived to be more desirable than the inexperienced target as dating partners. In addition, a male target was considered most desirable as a date when he engaged in moderate sexual activity, whereas a female target was viewed as most desirable as a date when she engaged in a high level of sexual activity. More recently, O’Sullivan (1995) found that target persons described as having a high number of past sexual partners were considered less desirable as dating partners and spouses than targets with few sexual partners. O’Sullivan and others (e.g., Bettor, Hendrick, & Hendrick, 1995) also reported that people presented as engaging in intercourse within a committed relationship were viewed as significantly more desirable for both dating and marriage than were people described as engaging in intercourse in an uncommitted relationship.

Whereas the aforementioned experimental studies were focused primarily on the impact of a target’s

sexual *behavior* on his or her perceived desirability as a partner, Oliver and Sedikides (1992) examined the influence of a target's sexual *attitudes* on romantic attraction. In one experiment, for example, they asked men and women to rate the desirability of an other-sex individual who had ostensibly completed the Sexual Permissiveness Scale (Hendrick & Hendrick, 1987) and who characterized him- or herself as extremely permissive or extremely nonpermissive. Both men and women judged the permissive target less favorably than the nonpermissive target in terms of marriage desirability. Women also found the permissive target less desirable as a date; men, however, rated the permissive target higher than the nonpermissive target on dating desirability.

In sum, the results from research using an experimental paradigm indicate that low to moderate levels of current or past sexual activity are more likely to increase one's desirability as a partner than is a history of multiple and/or casual sexual partners. These studies also suggest a reverse double standard in dating preferences, such that sexual experience enhances a woman's (casual) dating desirability more than it does a man's.

Overview of the Current Study

For the current investigation we used a combination of the mate-selection questionnaire and experimental person perception designs to examine more rigorously the role that a potential partner's sexual (in)experience might play in mate-preference processes. More specifically, an experimental manipulation was included within the mate-selection questionnaire paradigm. Thus, the current investigation benefits from the strengths of both methodological designs. The use of a mate-selection questionnaire enables us to examine how information about the sexual experience of a potential partner is valued relative to many other traits. The inclusion of an experimental

manipulation allows us to determine the extent to which a particular level of sexual experience is desired relative to other levels and in different types of partner; in addition, the results may be less susceptible to self-report biases because participants are not aware that preferences for different levels of sexual experience are being examined.

We provided participants with the commonly used mate-selection preference list originally created by Hill (1945); one third received the list in its original form (with the attribute "chastity"), one third received the list with "some sexual experience (had few sexual partners)" replacing "chastity," and one third received the list with "considerable sexual experience (had several previous sexual partners)" instead of "chastity." Thus, *number of previous sexual partners* was the sexuality variable manipulated. In addition, we manipulated *type of relationship*; half the participants were asked to indicate their preferences for a casual dating partner, and half evaluated a marital partner.

Goals and Hypotheses

Our first goal was to examine how the desirability rating of the sexuality item in the mate-selection list was affected by our first experimental manipulation [i.e., the particular level of sexual experience represented in the item (none, moderate, extensive)]. Prior research reviewed previously and a consideration of several theoretical perspectives suggest that our participants should prefer potential partners who have low to moderate as opposed to extensive sexual experience. For example, *evolutionary models* rely upon principles of evolution and natural selection and assume that all humans have been selected to maximize gene replication and thus reproductive success (e.g., Buss & Schmitt, 1993; Kenrick & Trost, 1989; Symons, 1979). According to this theoretical perspective, men and women have evolved to prefer long-term mates with a lower amount of

sexual experience. Specifically, the concealed nature of ovulation in the human female presumably creates a situation in which her (male) mate cannot know with certainty the paternity of any resulting offspring. Consequently, human males are assumed to pay particular attention to such characteristics as chastity, sexual loyalty, and faithfulness, because such signs of fidelity increase their certainty of paternity. Human females, who invest more direct physiological resources in their offspring (e.g., contributing their own body nutrients to the child during pregnancy and lactation) than men, are assumed to be sensitive to resource limitations and thus especially desirous of mates who can and will make a sustained contribution of resources in the form of material possessions, protection, and security. A highly sexually experienced man (i.e., one who potentially has other mates and/or offspring) may be less willing and/or able to make such a sustained resource contribution, and thus is less desirable as a partner. According to the evolutionary perspective, these are mate preferences that would have evolved over time because of the specific adaptive problems faced by early ancestors.

Sociological models make similar predictions, but at different levels of analyses. For example, according to sexual script theory (e.g., DeLamater, 1989; Gagnon & Simon, 1973), individuals are socialized to recognize and follow scripts that designate the who, what, where, when, and why of sexual behavior; from these normative scripts, men and women are seen as developing personal attitudes related to sexuality. The specific content of scripts may vary by behavior or situation (e.g., dating vs. marriage). Individuals who violate some aspect of a shared sexual script—for example, by having "too much" sexual experience—presumably are viewed as less desirable than individuals whose behavior follows or supports the script. Another sociological model, social factors theory

(e.g., Howard, Blumstein, & Schwartz, 1987), refers to structural factors (e.g., access to opportunities in society) and socialization factors in explaining why certain characteristics are considered desirable in a partner: Individuals are socialized (e.g., encouraged directly or indirectly by parents and others) to prefer a partner with less rather than more sexual experience.

In sum, based on these theoretical perspectives, we expected that both chastity and moderate sexual experience would be preferred in a long-term partner more than extensive prior experience. However, based upon the results of prior research (e.g., Regan & Berscheid, 1997; Sprecher et al., 1991) and script theory, we also predicted that the degree to which a particular level of sexual experience was desired would depend on the type of relationship under consideration. In particular, we expected that chastity would be rated as more desirable in a marriage partner than in a casual dating partner, and moderate and extensive sexual experience would be desired more in a casual dating partner.

Our second goal was to explore how preferences for sexual experience (or inexperience) in a partner may differ for men versus women. Each of the theoretical perspectives reviewed previously allows for possible gender differences. For example, evolutionary theorists argue that gender differences in sexuality stem from different obstacles to reproductive success that men and women faced in the evolutionary past. The behaviors that resulted in greater reproductive success for males (and thus were passed on to later generations) involved seeking sex with many fertile partners. Among our ancestors, female reproductive success required maximizing an offspring's chances of survival; through evolution, then, women should confine their sexual activity to a long-term relationship with a partner who controls many resources (e.g., Buss & Barnes, 1986; Buss & Schmitt, 1993; Kenrick, Sadalla, Groth, & Trost, 1990).

Sociological or social context theorists make similar predictions but focus on more proximate causes. Oliver and Hyde (1993), for example, discussed Mischel's (1966) application of social learning theory to gender differences in sexual behavior. According to this perspective, gender differences are shaped by the patterns of reinforcement and punishment that men and women receive for their sexual behavior within a particular society; specifically, men generally receive more positive reinforcement than women for seeking and engaging in sexual activity, whereas women generally receive more reinforcement for confining their sexual activity to committed, love-based relationships. Other sociological theorists suggest that different sexual scripts may exist for men and women; in particular, gender differences may result from sociocultural norms that encourage men to seek and initiate sexual activity with multiple partners and that expect women to establish limits upon sexual intimacy and to engage in sexual activity only with appropriate (i.e., socially sanctioned) partners (e.g., Gagnon & Simon, 1973; Reiss, 1981).

Each of these theoretical perspectives, whether concerned with social or evolutionary mechanisms, posits that men and women will possess different attitudes, beliefs, and orientations toward sexuality. In particular, women more than men should prefer sexual experience in a marital partner (this finding has been referred to in the literature as the *double standard in marriage choice*; e.g., Istvan & Griffitt, 1980), and men more than women should prefer sexual experience in a casual dating partner (this finding has been referred to as the *reverse double standard in dating* in recent experimental studies; e.g., Sprecher et al., 1991; Williams & Jacoby, 1989).

In addition to positing the existence of gender differences in preferences for sexual (in)experience, these theoretical perspectives also leave open the possibility that personality

dimensions of an individual (e.g., sociosexual orientation, or how permissive or restrictive an individual is about sex in uncommitted relationships) might play a role in moderating partner preferences. Thus, our third goal was to examine, within each gender, how orientation toward casual versus committed sex (i.e., sociosexuality) is related to preferences for sexual experience in a partner. Simpson and Gangestad (1992) argued that sociosexuality is an individual difference variable that is likely to explain within-gender differences in attributes desired in a romantic partner. Using an evolutionary perspective, these researchers (e.g., Gangestad & Simpson, 1990; Simpson & Gangestad, 1991a,b) proposed that sociosexuality may influence mate preferences because restricted (non-permissive) and unrestricted (permissive) sociosexual orientations represent two different mating strategies. In a series of studies, they found evidence that unrestricted individuals sought "romantic partners who are more physically and sexually attractive and who possess higher social visibility" (p. 45) and that restricted individuals sought "romantic partners who are more kind/affectionate, responsible, and loyal/faithful" (p. 45).

However, different preferences in characteristics desired in a partner by restricted and unrestricted individuals also can be explained by the similarity-attraction phenomenon. For example, the results from prior person perception experiments provide evidence that individuals who are more sexually permissive or experienced prefer a sexually experienced partner more than do less sexually experienced or permissive individuals (e.g., Istvan & Griffitt, 1980). In addition, correlational research conducted with actual couples reveals a high degree of similarity in sexual attitudes (e.g., Cupach & Metts, 1995; Smith, Becker, Byrne, & Przybyla, 1993). Based on both Simpson and Gangestad's (1991a) evolutionary perspective on restricted versus unrestricted mating strategies and the

similarity-attraction phenomenon, we expected to find, within each gender, that individuals more restrictive in their orientation toward sexuality would rate sexual chastity as more desirable than would sexually unrestricted individuals. Conversely, we expected that unrestricted individuals would rate moderate and extensive experience as more desirable in a partner than would restricted individuals.

Our final goal was to examine preferences for sexual chastity versus sexual experience in the context of other mate-selection preferences, thus taking advantage of the use of the mate-selection list. Based on recent mate-selection studies that used Hill's (1945) list (e.g., Buss, 1989; Hoyt & Hudson, 1981), we expected to find the sexuality item rated among the least preferred of the traits included in the mate-selection list. However, based on experimental work (e.g., Sprecher et al., 1991), we expected that the *relative* desirability of the sexuality item would depend on the level of sexual experience represented in the item, possibly in combination with the type of relationship specified (casual dating versus marriage) and the individual difference variables (i.e., gender and sociosexuality). More specifically, we hypothesized that the relative desirability rating of the sexuality item would be higher for chastity than for either moderate or extensive sexual experience, particularly for the marital relationship, for women, and for those participants who are restricted in their sociosexual orientation.

Method

Participants

A convenience sample of 436 undergraduate students (136 men, 300 women, average age = 19.8 years) from general studies classes at a large public Midwestern university were the participants. Eighty-five percent were White, 10% were Black, 2% were Hispanic, and 3% checked "other" or

did not indicate their ethnic background. This sample overrepresents women but closely reflects the racial/ethnic background of the population of students at this institution.

Measures

Participants received the mate-selection preference list originally created by Hill (1945). This list contains 18 partner traits (e.g., emotional stability, dependable character, good looks); the entire list of traits is presented later in Table 1. We selected this particular mate-selection list because it has been used in a number of previous studies (e.g., Buss, 1989; Hill, 1945; Hudson & Henze, 1969; Wiederman & Allgeier, 1992) and because it included an item on sexual experience (i.e., "chastity").

Three different versions of the list, which varied only in how the sexuality item was phrased, were distributed. One version included an item similar to that in the original Hill (1945) list: "sexual chastity (had no previous sexual partners)" (the original list included only the term "chastity"). The second version included the item "some sexual experience (had few sexual partners)," and the third version included the item "considerable sexual experience (had several previous sexual partners)." All other items included in the list were identical across the three versions. Participants responded to each item on a seven-point scale, ranging from 1 = *very undesirable* to 7 = *very desirable*; the midpoint, 4, was neutral. The response format has varied across research studies but was a three-point scale (desirable but not important, important, and indispensable) in the original Hill (1945) study.

Although the labels we used to represent number of prior sexual partners (i.e., "none," "few," and "several") may be criticized as nonprecise, there is one advantage to not providing more specific numbers to represent prior level of sexual experience. Specifically, this process allowed the meaning of these terms to differ depending on the gender of the partici-

pant (and thus, also, the gender of the partner). Evidence indicates that men report more lifetime sexual partners than do women (e.g., Laumann, Michael, Gagnon, & Michaels, 1994), and thus a specific number used to represent the moderate or high level of prior sexual experience may have different meanings for a male target than for a female target (i.e., it may seem much higher for a female target than for a male target because of different expectations and beliefs about male versus female sexual behavior; for a discussion of this issue, see O'Sullivan, 1995). Hence, our choice was to use labels.

Half the participants were asked to rate the desirability of the various traits for a "casual dating partner," and half were asked to respond for a "marriage partner." Thus, participants were randomly assigned to one of six different conditions corresponding to a 3 (Level of Sexual Experience: None, moderate, extensive) x 2 (Relationship Type: Casual dating, marriage) factorial design. The six different versions of the questionnaire were distributed randomly to students in the classes selected for data collection. For men, the *n* size per cell ranged from 19 to 26 ($M = 22.7$). For women, the *n* size per cell ranged from 43 to 52 ($M = 50.0$).

Upon completion of the ratings, participants responded to Simpson and Gangestad's (1991a) Sociosexual Orientation Inventory (SOI), a seven-item personality scale that assesses orientation toward casual versus committed sexual activity (individuals with an unrestricted sociosexual orientation tend to feel comfortable about engaging in sexual activity without commitment or closeness; restricted individuals typically require commitment and closeness before engaging in sexual activity with a partner). SOI items include the number of different sexual partners in the past year, the number of different sexual partners expected in the next five years, the number of partners with whom sex was had on only one occasion, and the frequency

of fantasy about having sex with someone other than the current partner. Three items measured attitudes toward casual sex ("Sex without love is okay," "I can imagine myself being comfortable and enjoying 'casual' sex with different partners," and "I would have to be closely attached to someone [both emotionally and psychologically] before I could feel comfortable and fully enjoy having sex with him or her"). The first three SOI questions were open ended. The question on fantasy was followed by eight responses (1 = *never*; 2 = *once every two or three months*; 3 = *once a month*; 4 = *once every two weeks*; 5 = *once a week*; 6 = *a few times each week*; 7 = *nearly every day*; 8 = *at least once a day*). The three attitude questions were followed by nine-point scales with the anchors 1 = *I strongly disagree* and 9 = *I strongly agree*. Following the procedure outlined by Simpson and Gangestad (1992), the items were standardized (through z-score transformations) separately for men and women. A sum of these z-scores represents the total score for SOI; the higher an individual's SOI score, the more unrestricted his or her sociosexual orientation.

This scale has demonstrated validity and reliability (Simpson & Gangestad, 1991a, 1992). For example, Simpson and Gangestad (1991a) demonstrated convergent validity by showing that higher scores on the SOI were associated with an earlier onset of sexual activity in a relationship, the greater likelihood of having more than one sexual partner at a time, and sexual relationships that were higher in quality. They demonstrated discriminant validity by showing that scores on SOI were unrelated to measures of other but unrelated sexuality constructs (e.g., sex drive). They also found high test-retest reliability ($r = .94$) for the SOI scale.

Procedure

Several introductory sociology classes were selected for the data collection. The study was described as an investigation of the traits con-

sidered desirable in a partner. Students were assured of the voluntary and anonymous nature of the study (almost everyone present the day the questionnaire was distributed completed it). The seating arrangements in the classes (separate desks and reasonable distance apart) allowed the students the privacy to complete the questionnaire. In addition, the students were told not to talk while they completed it. Students were thanked and a debriefing statement was read to the class after all students had completed the questionnaire.

Results

Ratings of the Sexuality Item as Affected by the Experimental Manipulations

To examine how the ratings of the sexuality item were influenced by the manipulated variables, the level of sexual experience referred to in the sexuality item and the type of relationship specified in the directions, a 3 (Level of Sexual Experience: None, moderate, extensive) \times 2 (Relationship Type: Casual dating, married) analysis of variance was conducted on the desirability rating for the sexuality item. The main effect for the Level of Sexual Experience was significant, $F(2,430) = 48.28, p < .001$. The sexuality item represented as "chastity" received the highest desirability rating ($M = 4.50$), followed by moderate ("some") sexual experience ($M = 3.65$) and extensive ("considerable") experience ($M = 2.65$) across the casual dating and marital conditions. A follow-up contrast among these means, conducted with Scheffé's test, indicated that each pair of means was significantly different at $p < .001$.

The Relationship Type main effect, and more importantly, the Relationship Type \times Level of Sexual Experience interaction were not significant, $F(1,430) = .94, ns$, and $F(2,430) = 1.49, ns$, respectively, which indicates that how the sexuality item and how each of the three versions of this item was rated in desirability were unaffected by the type of relation-

ship specified. Although we expected chastity to be preferred more in a marriage partner than in a casual dating partner, the means were not significantly different ($M = 4.28$ for marriage vs. $M = 4.72$ for casual dating, $t(148) = 1.70, ns$). Similarly, moderate sexual experience was not differentially preferred in a dating versus a marital partner ($M = 3.67$ vs. 3.63), $t(142) = .15, ns$. The same pattern was found for extensive sexual experience ($M = 2.55$ vs. 2.75), $t(140) = -.75, ns$. In sum, contrary to our hypotheses, chastity was desired more than moderate and extensive sexual experience, regardless of the type of relationship under consideration (casual dating vs. marriage).

Double Standards in Preferences for Sexual Experience in a Partner

Our second goal was to examine the possible existence of double standards in preferences for sexual experience in a partner. First, we conducted a full factorial ANOVA that included gender of participant—a 2 (Gender of Participant) \times 3 (Sexual Experience: Chastity, Moderate, or Extensive Sexual Experience) \times 2 (Casual Dating vs. Marital Relationship) design. The main effect for gender was not significant, $F(1,424) = .56, ns$, indicating that men and women expressed similar desirability ratings for the sexuality item. Furthermore, the Gender \times Sexual Experience interaction was not significant, $F(2,424) = .96, ns$, nor was the 3-way interaction, Gender \times Sexual Experience \times Relationship Type, $F(2,424) = .16, ns$. The only statistically significant result revealed by our ANOVA was a Gender \times Relationship Type interaction, $F(1,424) = 4.87, p < .03$. Follow-up *t*-test comparisons indicated that there was no difference between how men versus women rated the sexuality item for the marital relationship ($M = 3.75$ for men and $M = 3.48$ for women; $t(218) = 1.01, ns$), but women gave a higher desirability rating to the sexuality item than did men in the casual dating context ($M = 3.29$ for men vs. $M = 3.86$ for women;

$t[214] = -2.07, p < .05$). Although we did not expect our results to be affected by the much larger proportion of women than men in the full sample, we re-did this analysis with a smaller subsample of women created by selecting every other woman in the sample. The results from the ANOVA conducted on the smaller sample (consisting of 136 men and 153 women) were similar to the ANOVA reported in the text for the full sample; the only effect including gender that was significant was the Gender x Relationship Type interaction. Because these results were similar to those of the total sample, all other analyses are based on the total sample.

In addition, we conducted critical comparisons of selected cell means to examine the possible existence of two versions of the double standard identified in previous literature. First, no evidence was found for a traditional double standard in mate choice. Men did not prefer chastity in a marital partner to a significantly greater degree than did women, and women did not desire sexual ex-

perience, either a moderate or an extensive amount, more than did men. Second, no evidence was found for a reverse double standard in dating preferences. That is, no evidence was found that men preferred, to a greater degree than did women, an extensive level of sexual experience in a dating partner. These means are presented in Table 1.

*Intra-Sex Variation:
The Association Between
Sociosexual Orientation and
Mate/Date Preferences*

Our third goal was to examine, for each gender, how orientation toward casual versus committed sex (i.e., sociosexuality) was related to the desirability ratings for the sexuality item. As noted earlier, the sociosexual orientation items were converted to z-scores for each gender and then summed for a total score. Consistent with findings from prior research (Simpson & Gangestad, 1991a, 1992), the original scores (before transformation) reflected a more restrictive orientation for women than for men.

Men reported significantly more sexual partners in the past year ($M = 2.29$ vs. $1.26, t = 3.54, p = .001$), expected to have more sexual partners in the next five years ($M = 4.50$ vs. $1.70, t = 4.64, p < .001$), and reported more one-time sexual partners ($M = 2.33$ vs. $0.79, t = 3.08, p < .01$) than did women. Men, compared to women, reported more frequent fantasy about having extradyadic sex ($M = 4.82$ [once a week] vs. 2.50 [less than once a month]; $t[434] = 9.77, p < .001$) and had a more permissive response to each of the attitude statements. More specifically, men were more likely to agree (or less likely to disagree) that sex without love is okay ($M = 4.58$ vs. $2.70, t = 7.62, p < .001$), more likely to agree (or less likely to disagree) that sex with different partners would be comfortable ($M = 4.50$ vs. $2.18, p < .001$), and were less likely to agree (or more likely to disagree) that attachment would be necessary to have enjoyable sex ($M = 5.61$ vs. $7.88, t = -9.68, p < .04$).

Median splits enabled us to divide each gender into two groups with a

Table 1

Mean Value of the Sexual Experience Item(s) Relative to Other Mate-Selection Characteristics

| Item | Men | | Women | |
|------------------------------------|---------------------------------|---------------------------------|---------------------------------|---------------------------------|
| | Marital Partner | Dating Partner | Marital Partner | Dating Partner |
| The sexuality item | | | | |
| Chastity | 4.61 _(15-C) | 4.63 _(12-C) | 4.13 _(17-C) | 4.76 _(16-C) |
| Moderate sexual experience | 3.70 _(18-M/E) | 3.00 _(18-M/E) | 3.59 _(18-M/E) | 3.91 _(18-M/E) |
| Extensive sexual experience | 2.86 _(18-M/E) | 2.27 _(18-M/E) | 2.71 _(18-M/E) | 2.72 _(18-M/E) |
| Mutual attraction | 6.69 _(1-A) | 6.59 _(1-A) | 6.69 _(1-A) | 6.65 _(1-A) |
| Dependable character | 6.15 _(2-A) | 6.19 _(2-A) | 6.37 _(2-A) | 6.18 _(3-A) |
| Pleasing disposition | 6.12 _(3-A) | 5.88 _(5-A) | 6.05 _(5/6-A) | 6.14 _(4-A) |
| Emotional stability | 6.10 _(4-A) | 6.09 _(3-A) | 6.21 _(3-A) | 6.24 _(2-A) |
| Good health | 5.79 _(5-A) | 5.58 _(7-A) | 5.53 _(9-A) | 5.59 _(9-A) |
| Good looks | 5.76 _(6-A) | 5.77 _(6-A) | 5.19 _(11-A) | 5.42 _(10-A) |
| Education/intelligence | 5.73 _(7-A) | 5.90 _(4-A) | 6.05 _(5/6-A) | 6.05 _(5-A) |
| Sociability | 5.72 _(8-A) | 5.41 _(8-A) | 5.77 _(8-A) | 5.83 _(7-A) |
| Desire for home/children | 5.60 _(9-A) | 4.94 _(10-A) | 6.10 _(4-A) | 5.62 _(8-A) |
| Ambition/industriousness | 5.46 _(10-A) | 5.39 _(9-A) | 5.96 _(7-A) | 5.89 _(6-A) |
| Refinement/neatness | 5.18 _(11-A) | 4.91 _(11-A) | 4.90 _(12/13-A) | 5.14 _(12-A) |
| Good financial prospect | 4.91 _(12-A) | 3.91 _(16-C;15-M/E) | 5.49 _(10-A) | 5.39 _(11-A) |
| Good cook/housekeeper | 4.81 _(13-A) | 4.23 _(13-C;12-M/E) | 4.71 _(13-A) | 4.72 _(15-A) |
| Favorable social status | 4.67 _(14-A) | 4.17 _(15-C;14-M/E) | 4.90 _(12/13-A) | 4.98 _(13-A) |
| Similar educational background | 4.60 _(16-C;15-M/E) | 4.22 _(14-C;13-M/E) | 4.86 _(14-A) | 4.85 _(14-A) |
| Similar religious background | 4.18 _(17-C;16-M/E) | 3.87 _(17-C;16-M/E) | 4.59 _(16-A) | 4.50 _(17-C;16-M/E) |
| Similar political background | 3.78 _(18-C;17-M/E) | 3.32 _(18-C;17-M/E) | 3.82 _(18-C;17-M/E) | 3.95 _(18-C;17-M/E) |

Note: Each item was rated on a 7-point scale, with 1 = *very undesirable*; 4 = *neutral*; and 7 = *very desirable*. The number in parentheses indicates the relative rating of the item for the particular condition.

"A" indicates that this was the relative rating for all three sexual experience conditions. "C" indicates that this is the relative rating of the item in the *chastity* condition only. "M/E" indicates the relative rating of the item for the *moderate and extensive* levels of sexual experience.

relatively more or a relatively less restricted orientation toward sexuality. We then conducted, for each gender separately, a 3 (Level of Sexual Experience) x 2 (Sociosexual Orientation: Restricted, unrestricted) ANOVA on the desirability ratings given to the sexuality item. We collapsed over relationship stage because the results reported previously yielded no differences in ratings for casual dating versus marital relationships and because preliminary analyses that included relationship type and SOI yielded no significant effects for relationship type.

The ANOVA conducted for men yielded no significant main effect for SOI, $F(1,117) = 3.39$, ns, and more importantly, the SOI x Sexual Experience interaction was not significant, $F(2,117) = .39$, ns. Thus, the results indicate that the desirability rating men gave to the different versions of the sexuality item was not associated with the degree to which they were restricted versus unrestricted in their sociosexual orientation.

For women, however, the ANOVA results did yield a significant main effect for SOI, $F(1,269) = 11.96$, $p < .01$, which was qualified by a significant interaction between SOI and Level of Sexual Experience, $F(2,267) = 22.35$, $p < .001$. The restricted women rated a partner's chastity as more desirable than did the unrestricted women ($M = 4.90$ vs. 3.96 ; $t[96] = 3.11$, $p < .01$); unrestricted women rated moderate sexual experience ($M = 4.43$ vs. 2.91 ; $t[90] = -5.39$, $p < .001$) and extensive sexual experience ($M = 3.36$ vs. 2.00 ; $t[83] = -4.50$, $p < .001$) as more desirable (or less undesirable) in a partner than did their restricted counterparts. Thus, for women, but not for men, sociosexual orientation was related to preferences for sexual experience (inexperience) in a partner.

The Desirability of Sexual (In)Experience in a Partner Relative to Other Traits in the Mate-Selection List

Our final goal in this investigation was to examine how the sexual-

ity item was rated within the context of the larger mate-selection list in which it was embedded. Table 1 presents the mean levels and the order of these means in the larger list for all 18 traits for men versus women within each of the relationship conditions. For the sexuality item, the mean rating and relative ranking are presented for each of the three versions.

Although the other traits are not the focus of this study, both genders rated mutual attraction, dependable character, pleasing disposition, and emotional stability as the most desirable traits in the list. As we predicted, the sexuality item was rated low in desirability relative to the other items. Specifically, this item was 18th (last) in desirability when it referred to moderate or extensive sexual experience; however, it received slightly higher relative desirability ratings when it referred to chastity. The most favorable rating chastity received relative to the other items was in the casual dating context for men. Although this finding may seem counterintuitive, an examination of the means of the items near the bottom of the list across conditions indicates that this was primarily due to low desirability ratings given to a few other items in the casual dating context—similarity in religious background and similarity in political background, in particular.

To examine more formally how the relative rating of the sexuality item might depend on the level of sexual experience, the type of relationship, and gender of participant, we conducted an ipsative analysis (see Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991, and Sprecher et al., 1994, for examples of its use). We calculated a deviation score for each participant that reflected the difference between his or her sex item rating and the mean of his or her responses to all 18 list items. For the total sample and for each of the 12 subgroups (3 levels of sexual experience x 2 relationship types x 2 genders), this ipsative score was negative, which indicates that the item was rated less desirable relative to

other items included in the mate-selection list.

A 3 x 2 x 2 ANOVA was conducted on the ipsative scores to see how the relative rating of the sexuality item was affected by the particular level of sexual experience (chastity, moderate, extensive) and relationship type (casual dating vs. marital), in combination with gender of participant. The results of this analysis were quite similar to the results reported for the ANOVA conducted on the absolute ratings of the item. A strong sexual experience main effect was found, $F(2,423) = 45.29$, $p < .001$. The negative ipsative score was largest for the extensive sexual experience condition ($M = -2.58$), intermediate for the moderate sexual experience condition ($M = -1.64$), and smallest for the chastity condition ($M = -.87$). A follow-up Scheffe's test indicated that all three groups were significantly different at the $p < .001$ level. This main effect was not qualified by any significant interaction; furthermore, the main effects for gender and relationship type were not significant. Thus, the major influence on how the sexuality item was rated relative to the other items in the mate-selection list was the level of sexual experience referred to in the item.

Discussion

The mate-selection questionnaire paradigm often has been used to examine what traits young adults would desire in a partner (e.g., Buss & Barnes, 1986; Sprecher et al., 1994). However, only a few mate-selection studies have included an item that refers to the potential partner's level of sexual experience (e.g., Buss, 1989; Hill, 1945; Hoyt & Hudson, 1981). We extended the mate-selection literature by examining preferences for level of sexual experience in a partner. Borrowing from the person perception experimental methodology, which has also been used to examine desired levels of prior sexual experience in a partner (e.g., Sprecher et al., 1991), we incorporated an experimental manipulation into the standard mate-selection questionnaire design.

Participants received a mate-selection list that included a sexuality item referring to chastity, some previous sexual experience, or considerable previous sexual experience. A second experimental manipulation was presented in the directions to the questionnaire; participants were asked how much they desired each trait in *either* a casual dating partner *or* a marital partner.

The results indicated that chastity, regardless of whether it characterized a potential date or a potential spouse, was rated as significantly more desirable than both moderate and extensive sexual experience. Furthermore, moderate sexual experience was desired more (or was considered less undesirable) than extensive sexual experience. These findings are consistent with other person perception studies, which have also generally found that low levels of prior sexual experience are considered more desirable in a mate than are high levels (O'Sullivan, 1995; Sprecher et al., 1991). Although some experimental studies (e.g., Jacoby & Williams, 1985) have also shown moderate sexual experience to be more desirable than no sexual experience, the operationalization of moderate sexual experience in the current study (a few previous sexual partners) suggests a more extensive level of sexual experience than the operationalization of moderate sexual experience used in most previous person perception experiments (heavy petting with a current partner). The finding that chastity was perceived to be more desirable than sexual experience in a partner is consistent with complementary predictions from both the evolutionary and the scripts/ social factors perspectives. From an evolutionary perspective, chastity would be desirable because of paternity certainty (a concern for males) and concern about future paternal resources (a concern for females). In addition, the primary social control agents in our society—i.e., parents and religion—are likely to have encouraged the devel-

opment of sexual scripts for young adults that involve the selection of a chaste or relatively sexually inexperienced partner. However, there are also less distal explanations for this preference for chastity over more extensive sexual experience. People may have negative stereotypes and impressions of people with extensive sexual experience, including worry about their future faithfulness (O'Sullivan, 1995). Furthermore, people may be concerned about sexually transmitted diseases, including HIV/AIDS.

Although we had expected that preferences for sexual (in)experience would differ for a casual dating partner versus a marital partner, our expectations were not met. This may suggest that relationship type was not a strong manipulation. The directions referred to the type of relationship—casual dating partner versus marriage partner—but did not include further elaboration and hence may not have remained salient in the participants' minds as they completed the questionnaire. If we had referred specifically to the *sexual* and *short-term* nature of the casual dating relationship, for example, the differences between the two conditions may have been larger. It may also be that our participants were most concerned about evaluating the kind of partner with whom they would have sex, irrespective of the relationship context (i.e., how committed or involved they would be); this would explain why preferred level of sexual experience (number of previous partners) was unaffected by type of relationship.

Surprisingly, we did *not* find gender differences in how the different versions of the sexuality item were rated. Both men and women preferred chastity in a partner most and extensive prior sexual experience the least. This lack of gender difference is consistent with results from prior mate-selection studies examining preferences for chastity (Hoyt & Hudson, 1981). However, our results are inconsistent with those of person perception experiments (e.g., Sprecher

et al., 1991), which have shown some evidence for a "reverse double standard," such that men report a preference to date highly sexually experienced women, whereas women report a preference for sexually inexperienced or moderately experienced men. Theoretically, one could argue that socialization experiences and the content of sexual scripts for men and women are becoming more similar. However, the differences across studies may also have to do with the different ways sexual experience is manipulated (number of partners vs. type of sexual activities). For example, men, more than women, may desire that a casual dating partner has advanced to sexual intercourse in a prior relationship (i.e., not be a virgin) but may not prefer, to a greater degree than women, that the person have had multiple prior partners.

For women only, sociosexual orientation was related to preferences with respect to sexual experience in a potential date or mate. Specifically, women with an unrestricted orientation to sex (i.e., those who have more positive attitudes toward casual, uncommitted sexual activity) gave higher desirability ratings to moderate or considerable sexual experience in a partner than did women with a restricted sociosexual orientation. Conversely, the restricted women rated chastity in a partner as more desirable than did unrestricted women. Women with extensive sexual experience (one dimension tapped by the SOI) should be more willing to consider a sexually experienced person as a partner. More specifically, they would be unlikely to have negative impressions of a sexually active (hence, similar) other (Smith et al., 1993), would assume that they (and others like them) are "uniquely invulnerable" to sexually transmitted diseases (Brehm, 1992), and may be guided by a specific, adaptive mating strategy (e.g., Simpson & Gangestad, 1992). Why wasn't sociosexual orientation a good predictor for men of preferences for sexual experience in a partner? It may be because the

men were much less restricted than the women in our sample. Furthermore, there is evidence to indicate that most men who have not had sex (one dimension tapped by SOI) want to but have been unable to do so because they have not had a willing partner (Sprecher & Regan, 1996); consequently, the preferences of these relatively more restricted men might be expected to mimic those of their less restricted peers.

In this study we were interested not only in how desirability ratings for the sexuality item differed across the levels of sexual experience represented in the item, but also how desirability ratings for the sexuality item compared to those given to other items in the mate-selection list. Based on recent mate-selection studies (e.g., Hoyt & Hudson, 1981), we expected to find that the sexuality item (regardless of whether it was low, moderate, or extensive sexual experience) would have a relatively low desirability rating. Indeed, we did find that most other traits (dependable character, good looks, good financial prospects) were rated as more desirable than the sexuality item. However, we also found that whether the sexuality item was rated lowest or only near the bottom of the list depended on the level of sexual experience represented in the item. The item represented as either moderate or extensive sexual experience had the lowest relative desirability rating. However, the item represented as chastity did not have the lowest relative desirability rating, particularly in the casual dating context. An ANOVA conducted on ipsative scores revealed that the relative rating of the sexuality item was strongly influenced by the particular level of sexual experience; in addition, gender and relationship type did not moderate this result.

Strengths of this study include using the combined methodology and drawing on complimentary parts of evolutionary and scripts/sociocultural theories, as discussed previously. However, the study is not without limitations. Because the sexual experience

item was operationalized by labels rather than by specific numbers, we do not know how the participants interpreted "few sexual partners" and "several sexual partners" and whether their interpretations differed as a function of gender. We also do not know what other sexual impressions might have been confounded or associated with these labels. For example, the participants' preference (or non-preference) for the trait of having several sexual partners may have been a preference (or non-preference) for this trait in someone whom they thought might be willing to have uncommitted sex and/or might be unfaithful in the future and/or might have a high level of sexual desire.

A second limitation is that participants provided preferences for a hypothetical relationship. What people say they desire in a relationship as they consider each trait separately from the others may not correspond to what they would actually seek or settle for in the real marketplace of dating and marriage. In real life, people make compromises, and a partner's presumed sexual past may become unimportant relative to more desirable and salient characteristics. For example, although our participants expressed a preference for chastity over sexual experience in a potential partner, they may have responded quite differently if they had been given an actual choice between a chaste but unattractive person and a sexually experienced, physically attractive person. Related to this is the possible distinction between preference for a particular trait in a partner (which we measured) and preference for a person with a particular trait (which we did not directly measure). Whether participants' responses would be different had we assessed the latter is an empirical question for future research.

A third limitation of the study is that the sample was limited to young, single college students, who were probably almost all heterosexual (and thus thinking of an opposite-sex partner). (Although sexual orien-

tation was not measured in this study, other research conducted at the same university with similar classes indicates that the percentage who say that they are homosexual is 2% or less.) Preferences for chasteness versus sexual experience in a partner might differ for homosexual and heterosexual adults and are also likely to change with age and accumulated experience with committed relationships.

We encourage future investigators to examine how adults respond to knowledge about a potential partner's sexual past. For example, we need additional research to combine the mate-selection list and person perception experimental paradigms (and possibly with new lists and alternative manipulations of the sexual item(s)); examine the effects of other individual difference variables that might reflect the influence of socialization or scripts (e.g., religiosity, social class); increase the diversity of participants, particularly in terms of age and nonstudent status; and make use of qualitative research methodologies to obtain respondents' views and explanations of their choices. In addition, insofar as our results indicated that extensive sexual experience is not a particularly desirable characteristic, we need research on how adults who have had several sexual partners use impression management or other strategies to communicate this information to their potential partners without irrevocably damaging their value as a mate and thus jeopardizing their chances of obtaining positive interpersonal outcomes.

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