

# Liking some things (in some people) more than others: Partner preferences in romantic relationships and friendships

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## ABSTRACT

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The present investigation examined the degree to which various characteristics are desired in five types of relational partners. Men and women ( $N = 700$ ) indicated their preferences for several attributes in either a casual sex partner, dating partner, marriage partner, same-sex friend, or opposite-sex friend (randomly assigned). Participants also indicated how important it was to obtain a partner with the desired level of each attribute. Although participants most preferred warmth and kindness, expressivity and openness, and a good sense of humor across relationship types, they clearly distinguished between romantic/sexual relationships and friendships. Specifically, participants preferred (and felt that it was more important to obtain) higher levels of many desirable characteristics – including physical attractiveness, social status attributes, and disposition or personality traits (e.g., warmth, expressiveness, humor, intelligence) – in a romantic/sexual partner than in a friend. Participants also differentiated between same-sex and opposite-sex friendships. In general, they preferred higher levels of and/or believed it was more important to obtain physical attractiveness, social status, and dispositional/personality attributes from opposite-sex friends than from same-sex friends. To at least some degree, men's preferences were associated with the number of others they believed were available for a particular type of relationship; women's preferences generally were associated with perceptions of their own desirability as a partner.

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Most people can provide a 'wish list' of traits they would like a partner to have. This 'wish list' has been the focus of considerable research in the past several decades. In the typical partner preference or mate-selection study, respondents (often young, single college students) are provided with a list of traits and asked how much they would desire each trait in a potential date, mate, or spouse. The early research on this topic (e.g., Hill, 1945; Hudson & Henze, 1969) focused exclusively on preferences in a marriage partner; more recently, however, other types of partners, including a dating partner and a casual sex partner, also have been considered (e.g., Goodwin, 1990; Regan, 1998a, 1998b). Almost no research, however, has focused on preferences for traits in a friend, despite the fact that most individuals form many more friendships over the course of their lifetimes than they do sexual or romantic relationships, and report that those friendships constitute an extremely important aspect of their existence (e.g., Fehr, 1996; Werking, 1997).

The general objective of the present research is to provide a broader examination of people's preferences by considering multiple relational others, including friends. We asked each participant to respond to a list of traits for one of five types of relational partner (randomly assigned): marriage partner, dating partner, casual sex partner, same-sex friend, or opposite-sex (platonic) friend. Our goal was to examine whether and how preferences for characteristics differ among these types of relationships, with a specific focus on preferences for traits in a sexual/romantic partner versus a friend. We review two theoretical frameworks and the literatures on friendship and mate selection for suggestions about the differences and similarities we would expect to find in preferences across types of relationships.

### **An evolutionary perspective**

An evolutionary perspective focuses 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 genetic fitness (e.g., Buss & Kenrick, 1998; Cunningham, Druen, & Barbee, 1997; Gangestad & Simpson, 1990). Because not all potential relationships provide an equal opportunity for reproduction, preferences for traits may vary across types of relationships as a function of their reproductive potential. That is, the evolutionary framework suggests that the more likely one is to have the opportunity to reproduce with a particular partner, the more likely one would be to demand traits in him or her that signal reproductive value. Thus, the degree to which such traits as ambition and status (assumed to be important components of male reproductive value) and physical attractiveness (assumed to be an important feature of female reproductive value) are preferred in a relational partner should be associated with the degree

to which reproduction is possible within that particular type of relationship. A committed, long-term romantic relationship (e.g., a marital relationship) is the most likely context for procreation, although pregnancy also can occur in a dating relationship, a casual sex relationship, and a cross-sex friendship. In the less common situation that reproduction is desired with a same-sex friend, it is not possible for men, and can include the genes of only one of the two friends for women. Thus, according to this perspective, physical attractiveness, ambition, status, and other traits associated with reproductive value should be desired most in a spouse and least in a same-sex friendship. The other relationships, in which reproduction is possible although not likely, should be intermediate in the degree to which reproductively valuable traits are demanded.

### **A sociological/network perspective**

We also consider a sociological framework of close relationships (e.g., Marsiglio & Scanzoni, 1995; Scanzoni, Polonko, Teachman, & Thompson, 1989) to generate predictions about differences in trait preferences across relationship types. According to Scanzoni et al. (1989), people's networks consist of a variety of close (primary) relationships that can be defined by the types of interdependency that characterize the exchange in the relationships. Interdependencies are 'shared activities or related statuses and patterned exchanges between two people' (Marsiglio & Scanzoni, 1995, p. 26) and can be categorized into four types: *sexual* (e.g., sexual activity), *intrinsic* (e.g., self-disclosure, emotional support), *extrinsic* (e.g., money, services), and *formal* (e.g., shared legal status). A relational other may provide one, two, three, or all four types of interdependency. Using this perspective, we would argue that preferences for traits in a relational partner are linked with the type of interdependence(s) associated with a particular relationship. A marriage most often represents all four types of interdependency and thus people should be most demanding in their requests for traits in a marital partner in comparison with those for other relational partners. Close dating relationships often involve three of the four interdependencies – all but a formal legal status. Hence, people also should be demanding of traits in a partner for this type of relationship. Friendships generally are associated with the provision of intrinsic resources only, and thus such traits as warmth and understanding should be highly desired in a friend and perhaps desired as much in a friend as in a marriage or dating partner. However, traits associated with sexuality (e.g., good looks) and extrinsic resources (e.g., money) should be desired less in a friend than in a spouse or date, according to this perspective.

### **Literature on friendships**

The literature on friendships also can provide suggestions for the differences we would expect to find in the traits desired in a friend versus a romantic partner and the differences in traits desired for different types of friends. The few studies that have compared the characteristics of romantic relationships with those of friendships suggest that there are many more

similarities than differences (e.g., Davis, 1985; Davis & Todd, 1982). For example, trust, enjoyment, and acceptance have been attributed to both types of relationships. (Conversely, passion features [e.g., sexual desire] and exclusivity have been attributed to romantic/sexual relationships but less so to friendships.) Other evidence indicates that a romantic partner often is viewed as a close or best friend and that the features of friendship and romanticism overlap (e.g., Fischer, 1982; Hendrick & Hendrick, 1993). The findings of an underlying similarity in the attributes of friendships and romantic relationships suggest that at least some traits (e.g., such personality characteristics as kindness and warmth) will be preferred to the same degree in a friend and romantic partner.

Less research has been done on opposite-sex friendships, particularly in comparison with same-sex friendships (for reviews, see Rawlins, 1993; Werking, 1997). Opposite-sex friendships have been described as less common and more difficult to maintain than same-sex friendships (Rose, 1985) and are sometimes viewed as a stepping stone to romantic relationships, especially for single, heterosexual adults, who are likely to have more opposite-sex friends than married adults (e.g., Sapadin, 1988).

### **Research on partner preferences across romantic relationship types**

As noted earlier, most of the research on partner preferences has involved participants rating a list of attributes for only one type of relational other, typically either a spouse or date. In a few studies, however, preferences have been examined for partners in two or more types of sexual/romantic relationships. Findings from these previous studies generally indicate that intrinsic attributes (e.g., honesty, trustworthiness, kindness) are relatively more important for a committed, long-term relationship, whereas external attributes (e.g., physical appearance) are relatively more important for a short-term, sexual relationship (e.g., Kenrick, Sadalla, Groth, & Trost, 1990; Nevid, 1984; Regan, 1998a, 1998b; Regan & Berscheid, 1997). In the current investigation, we extended prior research by distinguishing among three types of romantic/sexual relationships: marriage partner, dating partner, and casual sex partner. We expected to find that most characteristics would be perceived as more desirable (or necessary) for a date or spouse than for a casual sex partner, with the exception of physical appearance, which would be perceived as more desirable in a casual sex partner.

We also compared the three types of romantic/sexual relationships on two additional attributes – sexual passion and prior sexual experience. Very few researchers have considered preferences for sexual attributes in a potential partner (for an exception, see Sprecher, Regan, McKinney, Maxwell, & Wazienski, 1997). Insofar as most men and women have casual sex in order to satisfy explicitly sexual goals (Regan & Dreyer, 1999), we expected that both sexes would view attributes related to sexuality as more desirable and necessary in a casual sex partner than in other relational partners.

To our knowledge, no research has been conducted that has directly compared preferences for a friend versus a romantic/sexual partner. However, Laner and Russell (1998) asked college students to select from a

large list of characteristics the six qualities they would most want in a best friend and the six qualities they would most want in a spouse. These researchers found that the characteristics chosen for the two types of relational partner overlapped considerably for both men and women and included such intrinsic attributes as 'communicative,' 'open/honest,' 'trustworthy,' and 'sensitive/warm.'

### **Effects of the social environment and self-assessed desirability**

Mate and friendship choices are made within a larger social environment and by individuals who possess unique dispositions and backgrounds. People's preferences, even as expressed in an anonymous questionnaire that has a 'wish list' quality unconstrained by reality considerations (e.g., risk of being rejected by someone with highly desirable traits), can be affected by factors in the rater's larger social environment and by his/her own characteristics. One aspect of the social environment likely to influence an individual's preferences is his or her perception of the 'field of eligibles' – the number of available (appropriate) partners in the surrounding social milieu (e.g., Kerckhoff & Davis, 1962; Reiss & Lee, 1988; Winch, 1958). A person's position in the larger social strata, as well as within a specific cultural sub-group, may affect his or her perceptions of the field of eligible mates and friends. Similarly, those with a large social network may have more opportunities to meet potential partners (e.g., Sprecher, Felmlee, Orbuch, & Willetts, 2002), and thus may view themselves as having a wider field of eligibles. We hypothesize that men's and women's perception of the availability of others for a particular relationship will be associated with the level of desirable attributes they prefer in a potential partner. For example, people who believe that there are many others available for a dating relationship are likely to be more demanding of traits in a potential date than people who believe that there are only a few available dating partners (and who consequently might be more willing to 'settle for less,' so to speak).

A person's assessment of his or her own attributes and desirability as a partner also may influence the criteria he or she establishes and utilizes when considering a potential relational partner. According to social exchange or equity models (e.g., Blau, 1964; Murstein, 1976; Walster, Walster, & Berscheid, 1978), people exchange their own assets for desirable attributes in a partner and end up matched with someone of about equal social desirability. We propose that the greater an individual's self-assessed desirability as a particular type of relational partner, the more he or she will demand desirable traits from potential partners in that same relational arena. Some past mate selection research provides evidence for this supposition. For example, Regan (1998a) found that, for both men and women, the higher their self-assessed rankings on attributes related to social status and agreeableness, the more selective they were on these same attributes for a potential sexual and romantic partner. In addition, Regan (1998b) reported that the higher a woman estimated her own rank to be on social status, intellect, and family orientation, the higher she

preferred her ideal sexual and romantic partners to rank on these dimensions. Similar results were found by Kenrick and colleagues (e.g., Kenrick, Groth, Trost, & Sadalla, 1993; Kenrick et al., 1990). Furthermore, Murray, Holmes, and Griffin (1996) found that people with a more positive self-image provided a more positive description of an ideal partner. The present study contributes to our understanding of this topic by examining the association between self-perceived desirability and preference ratings in different types of relationships. In addition, in this research, we make a distinction between preferences and the importance of these preferences. Thus, we can examine whether self-assessed desirability is more highly associated with wishes (i.e., desirability ratings) than with the importance ratings of these preferences.

### **Summary of the hypotheses and research questions of this investigation**

In sum, the general purpose of this investigation was to examine whether and how men's and women's preferences for particular traits differ as a function of the type of relationship under consideration. Our specific research hypotheses and research question, which are based on a consideration of evolutionary theory, network theory, and previous research on the differences between friendships and romantic relationships, were:

*H1:* Traits associated with resource acquisition and social status (e.g., social status, earning potential, ambition) will be rated as more desirable (and important) in a romantic/sexual partner (date, spouse, casual sex partner) than in a friend.

*H2:* Physical attractiveness will be rated as more desirable (and important) in a romantic/sexual partner (date, spouse, casual sex partner) than in a friend.

*H3:* Intrinsic personality attributes will be rated as equally desirable (and important) in a friend as in a romantic/sexual partner.

*H4:* Most traits will be desired more in a date or spouse than in a casual sex partner; the exceptions are physical appearance, sexual passion, and sexual experience, which will be rated as more desirable (and important) in a casual sex partner than in a date or spouse.

*RQ1:* How will preferences (and importance ratings) for characteristics in a same-sex friend differ from those expressed for an opposite-sex friend?

We also will test two hypotheses about the association between the perceived social environment (the 'field of eligibles') and desirability ratings, and between self-assessed worth as a partner and desirability ratings:

*H5:* The greater the perceived availability of others (i.e., the larger the field of eligibles) for a particular type of relationship, the more desirable men and women will demand that their partners be.

*H6:* The greater men's and women's self-assessed desirability as a partner for a particular type of relationship, the more desirable they will demand their potential partners to be.

## Method

### Participants

Participants were 700 students (59% women, 41% men) from a large, Midwestern university. The data were collected in two independent samples, four years apart ( $n = 439$  in 1996 and  $n = 261$  in 2000). The mean age of the participants was 20.15 years. Thirty-seven percent were first year college students, 21% were sophomores, 26% were juniors, 16% were seniors, and the remaining (< 1%) were either graduate students or responded 'other.' The majority reported that they were heterosexual (98.4%) and unmarried (99%).

### Procedure

A questionnaire entitled 'What People Prefer from Relationships' was distributed in a variety of sociology classes, including General Education courses, at the two time points (1996 and 2000). Participation was voluntary and anonymous. Each participant was randomly assigned to provide his or her preferences for a partner in one of five possible relationships: a casual sex partner (for a 'brief fling'), a dating partner, a marriage partner, a same-sex friend, or an opposite-sex, platonic friend.

All participants received a list of 14 traits or characteristics adapted from earlier mate selection research (e.g., Hatfield & Sprecher, 1995; Regan, 1998a): *Physical attractiveness, intelligence, ambition, warmth and kindness, money or earning potential, expressiveness and openness, social status, sense of humor, exciting personality, similarity on background characteristics (e.g., race, religion, social class), similarity on attitudes and values, similarity on social skills (e.g., interaction styles), similarity on interests and leisure activities, and complementarity (being opposites) on personality characteristics.* Participants in the casual sex, dating, and marriage partner conditions received an additional two characteristics: *sexual passion and prior sexual experience.* For each characteristic, participants indicated on a 9-point response scale how much they preferred their partner to have of this characteristic (e.g., 1 = *not at all attractive*; 5 = *moderately attractive*; 9 = *extremely attractive*), and how *important* it was to them to obtain a partner with that particular amount, again using Likert-type scales (1 = *not at all important*; 5 = *somewhat important*; 9 = *extremely important*). (Across the traits or characteristics, the correlations between the ratings for level desired and ratings of importance were moderate rather than extremely high, which suggests that they are assessing different dimensions of preferences in a partner.)

For some of the analyses described below, composite scores were created from responses to related items. A combination of factor analysis results and classification schemes utilized by previous researchers (e.g., Kenrick et al., 1993; Kollock, Blumstein, & Schwartz, 1994; Marsiglio & Scanzoni, 1995; Regan, 1998a; Regan & Sprecher, 1995) guided our decisions for grouping traits. First, *social status* composite scores were created from the responses to *ambition, money or earning potential, and social status* (Cronbach's alpha was .64 for the *level preferred* composite and .74 for the *importance* composite). Second, *intrinsic characteristics* composite scores were created from the

responses to *intelligence, warmth and kindness, expressivity and openness, sense of humor, and exciting personality* (Cronbach's alpha was .60 for the *level preferred* composite and .76 for the *importance* composite). Finally, *similarity* composite scores were created from the responses to the four similarity items (Cronbach's alpha was .69 for the *level preferred* composite and .77 for the *importance* composite).

Upon completion of the rating task, participants then were asked to estimate, using 9-point, Likert-type scales, (1) the relative availability of partners for that type of relationship (1 = *not enough people available*; 9 = *more than enough people available*), and (2) their own desirability as a partner for that type of relationship (1 = *not at all desirable*; 9 = *extremely desirable*).

## Results

### Preferences for traits in a romantic/sexual partner versus a friend: Tests of H1-H3

H1 predicted that traits associated with social status would be rated as more desirable (and judged to be more important) in a romantic/sexual partner than in a friend. Support was found for this hypothesis. The mean social status composite score for level preferred was higher for the combined date/spouse/casual sex partner conditions than for the combined friend conditions (6.68 [ $SD = .96$ ] vs. 6.01 [ $SD = .98$ ],  $t[694] = 8.91$ ,  $p < .001$ ). A similar difference was found for the mean importance ratings on the social status composite score (5.76 [ $SD = 1.57$ ] vs. 4.68 [ $SD = 1.65$ ],  $t[696] = 8.73$ ,  $p < .001$ ).

H2 predicted that physical attractiveness would be rated as more desirable (and important) in a romantic/sexual partner than in a friend. We also found support for this hypothesis. Participants who rated a date, spouse, or casual sex partner preferred a higher level of physical attractiveness from that individual than did participants who rated a same- or opposite-sex friend (7.09 [ $SD = 1.15$ ] vs. 5.94 [ $SD = 1.47$ ],  $t[697] = 11.10$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Similarly, those who rated a date, spouse, or sex partner also attached greater importance to physical attractiveness than did those who evaluated a friend (5.88 [ $SD = 1.64$ ] vs. 3.80 [ $SD = 2.18$ ],  $t[697] = 13.56$ ,  $p < .001$ ).

No support was found for H3, which stated that intrinsic traits would be rated as equally desirable (and important) in a friend as in a romantic/sexual partner. Contrary to the hypothesis, participants who rated a date, spouse, or casual sex partner preferred a higher level of intrinsic characteristics, as indicated by higher mean scores on the intrinsic composite index, than did participants who rated a friend (7.69 [ $SD = .69$ ] vs. 7.41 [ $SD = .72$ ],  $t[691] = 5.12$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Furthermore, those in the romantic partner conditions placed more importance on their preferences than did those in the friend conditions (7.24 [ $SD = 1.10$ ] vs. 6.80 [ $SD = 1.15$ ],  $t[691] = 5.04$ ,  $p < .001$ ).

Table 1 presents the results of a full comparison (via analyses of variance and Bonferroni-protected follow-up  $t$ -tests) across the five types of relationships for each specific trait. Subscripts indicate which means were significantly different. The number of significant differences found between one or more of the romantic relationships and one or both of the friendships reinforces the results of the planned comparisons presented earlier. Next, we turn to comparisons among the three types of romantic relationships and between the two types of friendships.

### Preferences for traits in a casual sex partner versus a date/mate: Tests of *H4*

*H4* predicted that most traits would be preferred less in a casual sex partner than in a date or spouse. To test this, we compared the ratings made by participants assigned to the casual sex partner condition with those made by participants assigned to the date or spouse condition on the composite scores for social status, intrinsic characteristics, and similarity. Those assigned to the casual sex partner condition were no less demanding of intrinsic characteristics than were those assigned to either the date or spouse conditions. Similarly, no differences were found between these conditions in preference ratings for social status characteristics and in preference (and importance) ratings for similarity. However, those assigned to the casual sex partner condition attached less importance to their ratings than did those assigned to the date/spouse conditions for intrinsic characteristics (6.85 [*SD* = 1.40] vs. 7.45 [*SD* = .84],  $t[411] = -4.70, p < .001$ ) and social status characteristics (5.41 [*SD* = 1.69] vs. 5.94 [*SD* = 1.48],  $t[415] = -3.30, p < .01$ ).

*H4* also predicted that physical appearance, sexual passion, and sexual experience would be rated as more desirable (and important) in a casual sex partner than in a date or marriage partner. Partial support was found for this prediction. Specifically, participants assigned to the casual sex partner condition preferred a higher level of physical attractiveness (7.31; *SD* = 1.27) than participants assigned to either the dating or spouse condition (6.98 [*SD* = 1.07],  $t[416] = 2.64, p < .01$ ). However, the importance ratings for physical attractiveness did not differ between the casual sex partner condition and the combined date/spouse conditions. Similarly, no differences were found between the conditions in preference for, or importance placed upon, sexual passion. However, participants preferred a higher level of previous sexual experience in a casual sex partner (4.41; *SD* = 1.90) than they did for a date or spouse (3.86 [*SD* = 1.70],  $t[412] = 3.01, p < .01$ ). No differences were found across the groups in the importance ratings for prior sexual experience.

Follow-up analyses were conducted to examine whether perhaps women had more pronounced differences in preferences for a date/spouse versus a casual sex partner than did men. However, a 2 (relationship type: date/spouse versus casual sex partner)  $\times$  2 (sex) analysis of variance conducted on each composite score, the physical attractiveness item, and the two sexuality items indicated no significant relationship type  $\times$  sex interaction effects.

### Preferences in traits in a same-sex friend versus an opposite-sex friend: Exploration of *RQ1*

Although we had not predicted which differences we would find between an opposite-sex friend and a same-sex friend, we had posed a research question asking which differences might be found. To examine this, we compared the ratings made by the participants assigned to the same-sex friend condition with those made by the participants assigned to the opposite-sex friend condition on composite scores for social status, intrinsic characteristics, and similarity, and for the physical attractiveness item. Results indicated that participants assigned to the opposite-sex friend condition preferred higher levels of intrinsic characteristics (7.58 [*SD* = .62] vs. 7.24 [*SD* = .77],  $t[278] = 4.16, p < .001$ ) and physical attractiveness (6.24 [*SD* = 1.48] vs. 5.68 [*SD* = 1.40],  $t[279] = 4.15, p < .001$ ) than did those assigned to the same-sex friend condition. In addition, those responding to an opposite-sex friend gave higher importance ratings to both intrinsic

**TABLE 1**  
**Means (and SD) for level preferred and importance (of preference) as a function of relationship type**

Characteristic	Relationship type									
	Casual Sex ( <i>n</i> = 142)		Dating ( <i>n</i> = 142)		Marriage ( <i>n</i> = 135)		Opposite- sex Friend ( <i>n</i> = 142)		Same-sex Friend ( <i>n</i> = 139)	
Warmth and Kindness										
Level preferred	8.01 <sub>a</sub>	(1.09)	8.17 <sub>b</sub>	(0.94)	8.32 <sub>c</sub>	(0.84)	8.00 <sub>d</sub>	(0.98)	7.35 <sub>abcd</sub>	(1.46)
Importance of preference	7.35 <sub>abc</sub>	(1.76)	7.88 <sub>ad</sub>	(1.11)	8.20 <sub>bef</sub>	(1.07)	7.58 <sub>eg</sub>	(1.18)	6.85 <sub>cdgf</sub>	(1.91)
Expressiveness and Openness										
Level preferred	7.58	(1.34)	7.81 <sub>a</sub>	(1.04)	7.90 <sub>ab</sub>	(1.03)	7.68	(1.14)	7.39 <sub>ab</sub>	(1.27)
Importance of preference	6.85 <sub>ab</sub>	(1.84)	7.44 <sub>ab</sub>	(1.41)	7.73 <sub>bcd</sub>	(1.14)	7.11 <sub>c</sub>	(1.58)	6.70 <sub>bd</sub>	(1.95)
Physical Attractiveness										
Level preferred	7.31 <sub>ab</sub>	(1.27)	6.91 <sub>cd</sub>	(1.08)	7.06 <sub>ef</sub>	(1.06)	6.24 <sub>aceg</sub>	(1.48)	5.63 <sub>bdgf</sub>	(1.40)
Importance of preference	5.97 <sub>ab</sub>	(1.87)	5.79 <sub>cd</sub>	(1.57)	5.88 <sub>ef</sub>	(1.46)	4.32 <sub>aceg</sub>	(2.14)	3.27 <sub>bdgf</sub>	(2.11)
Intelligence										
Level preferred	7.13 <sub>a</sub>	(1.11)	7.24 <sub>b</sub>	(0.97)	7.27 <sub>c</sub>	(0.83)	7.01 <sub>d</sub>	(1.02)	6.43 <sub>abcd</sub>	(1.18)
Importance of preference	6.23 <sub>ab</sub>	(1.93)	6.89 <sub>ac</sub>	(1.33)	7.19 <sub>bde</sub>	(1.13)	6.48 <sub>df</sub>	(1.61)	5.78 <sub>cef</sub>	(1.84)
Ambition										
Level preferred	7.11 <sub>a</sub>	(1.23)	7.36 <sub>bc</sub>	(1.06)	7.40 <sub>de</sub>	(1.05)	6.90 <sub>bd</sub>	(1.25)	6.71 <sub>ace</sub>	(1.37)
Importance of preference	6.06 <sub>ab</sub>	(1.95)	6.74 <sub>ac</sub>	(1.43)	7.02 <sub>bde</sub>	(1.42)	6.24 <sub>d</sub>	(1.72)	5.82 <sub>ce</sub>	(1.93)
Money or Earning Potential										
Level preferred	6.37 <sub>ab</sub>	(1.45)	6.49 <sub>cd</sub>	(1.40)	6.68 <sub>ef</sub>	(1.37)	5.65 <sub>ace</sub>	(1.43)	5.43 <sub>bd</sub>	(1.28)
Importance of preference	5.04 <sub>abc</sub>	(2.15)	5.39 <sub>de</sub>	(2.03)	5.78 <sub>afg</sub>	(2.10)	4.09 <sub>bdf</sub>	(2.23)	3.53 <sub>ceg</sub>	(2.06)
Social Status										
Level preferred	6.25 <sub>ab</sub>	(1.44)	6.13 <sub>c</sub>	(1.33)	6.37 <sub>de</sub>	(1.19)	5.71 <sub>ad</sub>	(1.35)	5.67 <sub>bce</sub>	(1.17)
Importance of preference	5.12 <sub>ab</sub>	(2.10)	5.26 <sub>cd</sub>	(2.00)	5.51 <sub>ef</sub>	(2.02)	4.34 <sub>ace</sub>	(2.18)	4.06 <sub>bdf</sub>	(2.24)
Sense of Humor										
Level preferred	7.73	(1.14)	7.77	(1.13)	7.76	(0.97)	7.84	(0.99)	7.72	(1.16)
Importance of preference	6.89 <sub>a</sub>	(1.84)	7.42 <sub>a</sub>	(1.34)	7.38	(1.42)	7.06	(1.58)	7.04	(1.62)

TABLE 1 continued

Characteristic	Relationship type									
	Casual Sex ( <i>n</i> = 142)		Dating ( <i>n</i> = 142)		Marriage ( <i>n</i> = 135)		Opposite- sex Friend ( <i>n</i> = 142)		Same-sex Friend ( <i>n</i> = 139)	
Exciting Personality										
Level preferred	7.68	(1.15)	7.55	(1.23)	7.44	(1.17)	7.40	(1.10)	7.31	(1.16)
Importance of preference	6.87	(1.67)	7.23 <sub>a</sub>	(1.32)	7.06	(1.39)	6.74	(1.49)	6.67 <sub>a</sub>	(1.65)
Similarity on Background Characteristics										
Level preferred	6.59 <sub>a</sub>	(1.53)	6.39	(1.71)	6.67 <sub>b</sub>	(1.53)	5.96 <sub>ab</sub>	(1.76)	6.12	(1.64)
Importance of preference	5.93 <sub>ab</sub>	(2.06)	5.92 <sub>cd</sub>	(2.02)	6.25 <sub>ef</sub>	(1.96)	5.14 <sub>ace</sub>	(2.41)	4.71 <sub>bd</sub>	(2.38)
Similarity on Attitudes and Values										
Level preferred	7.22	(1.35)	7.15	(1.28)	7.48 <sub>ab</sub>	(1.30)	6.96 <sub>a</sub>	(1.27)	6.86 <sub>b</sub>	(1.44)
Importance of preference	6.77 <sub>a</sub>	(1.77)	6.80 <sub>b</sub>	(1.54)	7.24 <sub>cd</sub>	(1.51)	6.28 <sub>c</sub>	(1.85)	5.96 <sub>abd</sub>	(2.04)
Similarity on Social Skills										
Level preferred	6.74	(1.35)	6.69	(1.55)	7.04 <sub>a</sub>	(1.27)	6.59	(1.54)	6.47 <sub>a</sub>	(1.53)
Importance of preference	6.16 <sub>a</sub>	(1.80)	6.08	(1.80)	6.67 <sub>bc</sub>	(1.50)	5.89 <sub>b</sub>	(1.85)	5.53 <sub>ac</sub>	(2.19)
Similarity on Interests and Leisure Activities										
Level preferred	6.96	(1.53)	7.11	(1.35)	7.07	(1.35)	7.10	(1.34)	7.20	(1.35)
Importance of preference	6.21	(1.92)	6.51	(1.66)	6.70	(1.55)	6.43	(1.66)	6.56	(1.91)
Complementarity on Personality Characteristics										
Level preferred	4.70	(1.65)	4.51	(1.45)	4.58	(1.60)	4.58	(1.45)	4.64	(1.25)
Importance of preference	4.92 <sub>a</sub>	(2.02)	4.95 <sub>b</sub>	(1.80)	5.06 <sub>c</sub>	(1.89)	4.46	(1.97)	4.20 <sub>abc</sub>	(1.90)
Sexual Passion										
Level preferred	7.81	(1.20)	7.56	(1.23)	7.64	(1.19)	–	–	–	–
Importance of preference	7.12	(1.77)	6.97	(1.48)	7.19	(1.43)	–	–	–	–
Prior Sexual Experience										
Level preferred	4.41 <sub>a</sub>	(1.90)	3.95	(1.64)	3.77 <sub>a</sub>	(1.76)	–	–	–	–
Importance of preference	5.97	(2.37)	5.62	(2.38)	5.86	(2.34)	–	–	–	–

Note. Shared subscripts within the same row indicate that these means are significantly different at  $p < .05$ . All responses were made on a 9-point scale (1 = *not at all*, 9 = *extremely*). The number of males and females, respectively, in each condition were: Casual sex partner (54 and 88), dating partner (50 and 92), marital partner (58 and 77), opposite-sex friend (69 and 73), and same-sex friend (59 and 80).

characteristics and physical attractiveness, as well as to social status, than did those responding to a same-sex friend. No differences were found between respondents in these two conditions in preferences (or importance ratings) for similarity. See the last two columns of Table 1 for differences between the two types of friendships on ratings for specific items.

### **The associations of the perceived availability of others and self-assessed desirability with preferences**

*H5* predicted that men's and women's estimates of the availability of partners for a specific type of relationship would be associated with being more demanding with regard to preferences for that type of relationship. To test this hypothesis, composite scores were created based on the mean preference and importance ratings for the 14 characteristics (all except the two sexuality items). Cronbach's alpha was .76 for the level preferred composite and .88 for the importance composite.

Only limited support was found for this hypothesis. For men assigned to the dating partner condition, perceived availability of others for such a relationship was correlated significantly with preferences for that type of partner ( $r = .40$ ,  $p < .01$ ); that is, the more people men perceived were available for a dating relationship, the higher they desired a dating partner to score across the 14 characteristics. Furthermore, for men assigned to the casual sex partner condition, the perceived availability of partners was associated with stronger importance ratings expressed in that condition ( $r = .28$ ,  $p < .05$ ). However, no other correlations reached significance, and, for women, none of the correlations were significant.

*H6* predicted that participants' self-assessed desirability as a partner would be correlated positively with their overall preference (and importance) ratings, within each relationship type. For women, perceived desirability as a marriage partner and as a same-sex friend was correlated with overall preferences for those types of partner ( $r = .37$ ,  $p < .01$ , and  $r = .42$ ,  $p < .001$ , respectively). That is, the higher a woman estimated her value to be for these types of relationship, the more exacting were her standards with respect to traits in a potential partner. In addition, for women, self-perceived desirability as a dating partner was associated with the importance ratings in that condition ( $r = .24$ ,  $p < .05$ ). For men, self-assessed desirability was associated with importance ratings in the casual sex condition ( $r = .43$ ,  $p < .001$ ) and in the marital condition ( $r = .31$ ,  $p < .05$ ). However, the other correlations for men and women were not significant.

## Discussion

Most prior investigations of partner preference have asked individuals to identify the traits or characteristics they prefer in a partner for one specific type of relationship, typically marriage or dating. Although a few researchers have compared preferences for two or more types of relational partners, the focus has been limited to relationships that are romantic or sexual in nature (e.g., dating partner vs. spouse, long-term romantic partner vs. casual sexual partner). The present study was designed to provide a broader view of partner preferences by exploring the attributes that men and women desire (and the importance that they place on their

preferences) in five types of relational partners: spouse, dating partner, casual sex partner, same-sex friend, and opposite-sex friend.

### **Attributes most desired overall**

Across all types of relationships, warmth and kindness, expressiveness and openness, and sense of humor were judged to be the most desirable attributes a partner could have. In addition, participants attached the highest importance to these traits; that is, they felt that it was extremely important to obtain a partner with the desired level of characteristic. Thus, characteristics associated with intrinsic interdependencies (e.g., warmth and kindness) were desired more than characteristics traditionally classified as reproductive assets (physical attractiveness, wealth) or associated with extrinsic interdependencies (Marsiglio & Scanzoni, 1995). These results are consistent with those of other researchers in the area of mate selection (e.g., Hatfield & Sprecher, 1995; Regan, 1998a, 1998b) and also demonstrate the importance of such intrinsic characteristics for friendship selection. Unlike extrinsic features (e.g., those related to appearance or social status), which may be particularly relevant to the formation of successful reproductive relationships, intrinsic attributes that reflect an ability and a motivation to provide social and emotional support – like warmth and expressiveness – may be fundamental to the establishment and maintenance of *all* interpersonal relationships.

### **Preferences for traits in a romantic/sexual partner versus a friend**

Although our participants emphasized intrinsic attributes across all relationship types, we also found that both sexes expected more from their romantic and sexual partners than from their friends. Specifically, and as hypothesized, participants preferred that their dates, spouses, and casual sex partners score higher on extrinsic attributes (e.g., those related to social status and physical appearance) than their same- or opposite-sex friends. In addition, however, and contrary to our hypothesis, participants desired their romantic/sexual partners to score higher on intrinsic traits and characteristics (e.g., humor, expressiveness, warmth) than their friends. The relatively higher criteria expressed for romantic relationships than for friendships mirrors the differential value placed upon the two types of relationships in contemporary society. That is, the romantic pair bond is assumed to have priority over all other possible dyadic relationships, with the possible exception of the parent-child bond. As a result, people may come to expect more from their romantic partners, and be more concerned that a romantic partner (rather than a friend) possess desirable attributes. The different levels of exclusivity characteristic of romantic versus friendship relationships also may explain our participants' preference pattern. People may be less demanding with respect to a potential friend's characteristics because the norm of exclusivity characteristic of romantic relationships does not generally apply to friendships (e.g., Davis & Todd, 1982). Insofar as social norms dictate that individuals may have many friends at the same time but only one romantic partner, people are

likely to be less concerned that one particular friend possesses a constellation of ideal traits.

### **Preferences for attributes in a casual sex partner versus a date or mate**

The preferences our participants expressed were quite similar for a casual sex partner, a date, and a spouse. We initially had hypothesized that both sexes would make a clear distinction between casual sex partners and more serious romantic partners. However, our results indicated that men and women emphasized such intrinsic characteristics as warmth and kindness, expressiveness and openness, and humor in all three types of relational partners. As suggested earlier, not only may these intrinsic attributes be fundamental or core features of all interpersonal relationships, but it also may be the case that our participants viewed (and evaluated) the casual sex partner described in our study as a potential long-term mate. There is some evidence that many adults do, in fact, subscribe to the notion that casual sexual encounters (e.g., one night stands, 'flings') can evolve into committed or more 'romantic' relationships (Regan & Dreyer, 1999).

This is not to say that participants viewed the three types of partners as interchangeable. Although intrinsic attributes were desired equally in sexual and romantic partners, planned comparisons revealed that participants preferred higher levels of physical attractiveness and prior sexual experience in a casual sex partner than in either a dating partner or spouse. This result is in accord with earlier mate selection research, which suggests that casual sex partners are evaluated primarily (or more so than other types of partner) on dimensions related to external appearance and sexuality (e.g., Kenrick et al., 1993; Regan & Berscheid, 1997). Our comparisons also revealed that participants felt that it was less important to obtain the desired levels of various intrinsic personality attributes (e.g., intelligence, warmth and kindness) and social status characteristics (e.g., earning potential) from a casual sex partner than from a date or spouse. These results suggest that the type of relationship under consideration may affect the importance that people attach to criteria more strongly than it affects the actual criteria. That is, people ideally may wish to obtain the same high levels of desirable traits from a casual sex partner that they do from a dating partner or spouse, but at the same time they may be willing to settle for less in such a casual liaison.

### **Preferences for attributes in a same-sex friend versus an opposite-sex friend**

We also explored how friendship preferences might differ as a function of the type of friendship under consideration. Generally, our participants were more demanding of an opposite-sex friend than they were of a same-sex friend. More specifically, those assigned to respond to an opposite-sex friend desired higher levels of physical attractiveness and intrinsic characteristics and attached greater importance to physical attractiveness, intrinsic characteristics, and social status than those assigned to a same-sex

friend. An evolutionary perspective would suggest that people unconsciously (or consciously) recognize that reproduction is possible with an opposite-sex friend and hence may be more demanding in order to maximize opportunities to reproduce successfully. However, the results also may be explained by the perceived function of opposite-sex friendships in our society, particularly for young heterosexual adults. Opposite-sex friendships are often viewed as a stepping stone to romantic relationships; hence, people may wish for more desirable characteristics in an opposite-sex friend than in a same-sex friend.

### **Partner preferences and their association with the social environment and perceived self-worth**

The majority of prior research on friendship and mate selection has assessed men's and women's partner preferences with little regard for such real-world interpersonal constraints as the individuals' own attributes and the quality and quantity of partners available for a particular type of relationship. Thus, one of the goals of this study was to explore the association between these two aspects of social interaction and participants' partner preferences.

First, we examined the association between the social contextual variable of the 'field of eligibles' and partner preferences. Our participants were asked to estimate the availability of possible others for a particular type of relationship. We hypothesized that people who believed that many potential dates (for example) were available would hold higher standards for a dating partner than those who felt that few dating options existed. Our hypothesis was *not* supported for women. Women's partner preferences generally were unrelated to their estimates of partner availability. Men's preferences, however, were associated with their perceptions about the number of potential partners available in a dating context. Specifically, the more people (women) our (primarily heterosexual) male participants believed were potentially available for a dating relationship, the higher they desired a hypothetical dating partner to score on desirable traits. Similarly, the more others men believed were available for a casual sex relationship, the more importance they attached to their attribute preferences for this type of relationship. This pattern of results suggests that men, who have been socialized to initiate and pursue romantic and sexual opportunities (e.g., Rose & Frieze, 1989; Sprecher & McKinney, 1987), may be particularly attentive to the field of eligibles. Women, whose sex role socialization typically includes the refusal or acceptance of male sexual and romantic invitations, may be less focused on this aspect of the social environment.

Second, we investigated the association between self-evaluations (i.e., self-assessed desirability as a particular type of relational partner) and preferences. Social exchange models of relationship formation (e.g., Murstein, 1976) assume that, over time and as a function of experience, individuals construct self-images of their attractiveness to potential partners, and that these self-images influence preferences and other aspects

of social interaction. Based upon this theoretical argument, we expected that our participants' self-evaluations would be significantly associated with their partner criteria. For the most part, this is what we found. Specifically, our results revealed that women's self-assessed value as a marriage partner and a same-sex friend was positively correlated with their partner preferences. In addition, women's self-assessed value as a dating partner was associated with stronger importance ratings in this condition. Thus, women who viewed themselves as highly desirable were more exacting with respect to their potential sexual, romantic, and friendship partners. Although men's self-perceived desirability was unrelated to their partner preferences in any relational context, it was associated with stronger importance ratings in the casual sex and the marital conditions. These results suggest that both sexes are aware of the social exchange process, but that women may be relatively more attuned than men to their own value or desirability as a partner and how this value may influence the type of partner they can expect to attract and retain.

### **Limitations and future research directions**

Although considerable research has been conducted on men's and women's preferences for traits in a romantic partner, almost no research has been conducted using a similar list of traits to examine people's selection criteria for friends. A strength of this experimental study was that multiple types of relational others, including same-sex and opposite-sex friends, were considered. However, there were also limitations to the study that suggest avenues for future research.

For example, although the use of undergraduate students allowed us to more easily compare our findings with those of other researchers who sampled from the same population, we encourage future investigations of relationship preferences utilizing a more demographically diverse participant population. Age is one demographic factor that might be related to partner preferences. Reviews of the friendship literature (e.g., Blieszner & Adams, 1992; Fehr, 1996) suggest that friendship may take on different meanings at different ages. In addition, some research indicates that culture or country of origin moderates partner preferences (e.g., Wallen, 1989; for discussion, see Goodwin, 1999), as does ethnicity (e.g., Sparrow, 1991; Sprecher, Sullivan, & Hatfield, 1994), social class and other social context factors (e.g., Adams & Allan, 1998), sexual orientation (e.g., Howard, Blumstein, & Schwartz, 1987; Rawlins, 1994), and personality type (e.g., Hester & Rudolph, 1994).

We also need more research that addresses the role played by expectations and preferences in the formation and maintenance of actual relationships. For example, our results may explain why romantic relationships are considered to be more fragile and subject to termination than are friendships (e.g., Sprecher & Fehr, 1998). We found that people desire a constellation of ideal traits to a greater degree in a romantic partner than in a friend. The higher criteria men and women express for a romantic partner than for a friend could result in a greater risk of dashed expectations in

romantic relationships than in friendships. In addition, people may be more likely to overlook, or be less affected by, negative attributes in a friend than in a romantic partner. Future research might explore these interesting possibilities.

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