

Self-reported mate preferences and “feminist” attitudes regarding marital relations

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Abstract

Despite huge interest in human mate choice in the last two decades, intraspecific variation in human mate preferences has received relatively little attention. We investigated individual variation in mate preferences in a group of university students ($n=292$) relative to perceptions of equality and autonomy. If the constraints of societal role occupancy strongly influence sex differences in the ranking of mate preferences, then we predict that these sex differences should diminish with increasing endorsement of gender equality and autonomy. Women's mate preferences did not emulate men's with increasing endorsement of gender equality. The importance placed on “earning potential” in a potential mate decreased with increasing “feminist” attitude score, however, feminist attitude was not related to the importance of “physical attractiveness.” Findings reflect the variation in women's mate preferences and are discussed in terms of evolved conditional strategies.

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1. Introduction

The relative value of human mate preferences (people's beliefs about which characteristics are important in a potential mate) has been intensively researched over the past two decades with robust findings of sex differences: cross-culturally, women place greater importance than men on cues of a potential mate's ability to acquire resources, whereas men place greater importance on cues of fertility and reproductive value, such as physical attractiveness (Buss, 1989a; Kenrick & Keefe, 1992). Such preferences have been found to reflect mating behaviour (Pérusse, 1994). More recently, evolutionary explanations have emphasized phenotypic plasticity and the flexibility of mating preferences and strategies in response to socioenvironmental circumstances (Gangestad & Simpson, 2000; Pawlowski & Dunbar, 1999, 2001; Waynforth, 2001; Waynforth & Dunbar, 1995). There has been little empirical work on within-sex variation in female mate preference, and the need for such research has been voiced repeatedly (Gangestad & Simpson, 2000; Gowaty, 1992a, 1992b).

In contemporary Western society, differences traditionally exist in the paid occupations available to men and women. These differences in roles can be related to physical predispositions and the greater efficiency achieved when division of labour is established (Eagly & Wood, 1999; Mead, 1935, 1962; Wood & Eagly, 2000), such that women spend proportionately more time involved in childcare and domestic activities and men spend proportionately more time earning a wage. A positive feedback mechanism then operates as women and men adopt sex-specific skills to facilitate successful role performance: These stereotypical skills contribute to the formation of gender roles that mediate differences in paid occupations and role occupancy. Male gender roles have typically been associated with the greater power and status that emerge in patriarchal societies, where the relative value of women as exchange commodities is measured by their physical attractiveness. Men and women should therefore desire traits in a potential mate that complement the limitations and responsibilities of their social role. Consequently, the positions occupied by men and women in the society may strongly influence the value placed on "physical attractiveness" by men and "good earning potential" by women. So far, with one exception (Johannesen-Schmidt & Eagly, 2002), research examining the relationship between gender equality and mate preference has used only population-level indices (Buss, 1989b; Eagly & Wood, 1999; Gangestad, 1993; Glenn, 1989).

Feminist theories are concerned with how gender impacts individuals' ability to control their own and others' resources, lives, and power (Gowaty, 1992a). Historically, much feminist empiricist writing has attempted to dispel gender stereotypes by emphasizing a lack of sex differences in behaviour (e.g., Bohan, 1993; Maccoby & Jacklin, 1974; see Eagly, 1995a, 1995b). Consequently, those with a stronger feminist attitude may be expected to self-present their beliefs despite the constraints and biases of social structure. We might expect female and male rank orderings of mate choice criteria to become more similar with increasing endorsement of gender equality. Here, we use a subset of questions from a scale of liberal feminist attitude, focusing on beliefs about equality and autonomy, to investigate variation in the rank ordering of mate preferences with attitudes towards gender equality. We predict that women with higher "feminist" attitude scores will value

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