

The effects of female control of resources on sex-differentiated mate preferences

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Abstract

A number of sex differences in mate preferences have been reported across cultures. Women prefer partners who are older than them whereas men prefer partners who are younger than them. Women have stronger preferences for resource-acquisition characteristics whereas men have stronger preferences for physical attractiveness. Recently, studies have reported shifts in female preferences with increasing female empowerment and associated female attitudes. Other studies, however, report opposite effects of female wealth and income. In this study, we investigated the effects of female control of the resources necessary to raise offspring successfully on mate preferences. We developed measures of resource control at the level of the individual and investigated relationships between these and mate preferences using an internet survey. Resource control was associated with preferences for physical attractiveness over good financial prospects and greater maximum partner age tolerated. Resource control, however, was also associated with tolerance of younger partners. The results implicate the role of constraints on female access to and control of resources in sex-differentiated mate preferences and highlight differences between resource control and wealth.

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1. Introduction

Studies on human mate preferences have reported a number of sex differences. Women typically prefer older partners (e.g., Buss, 1989a; Kenrick & Keefe, 1992; Otta, da Silva Queiroz, de Sousa Campos, & Silveira, 1999; Waynforth & Dunbar, 1995). They have stronger preferences for resource-acquisition characteristics in a partner whereas men have stronger preferences for physical attractiveness (e.g., Buss, 1989a, 1990, 1994; Buss & Barnes, 1986; Feingold, 1990, 1991, 1992; Gil-Burmann, Peláez, & Sánchez, 2002; Li, Kenrick, & Bailey, 2002; Waynforth & Dunbar, 1995). These sex differences have been attributed to sex-specific reproductive constraints: the minimal investment in reproduction by a female is greater than that of a male owing to the costs of producing large gametes (Bateman, 1948), internal gestation, lactation, and extended parental care (Trivers, 1972). Thus, female reproductive success is constrained by access to the resources necessary to raise costly offspring whereas male reproductive success is constrained by access to fertile females (Trivers, 1972). Consequently, women should prefer partners who demonstrate willingness and ability to invest direct resources in offspring (e.g., partners with resource-acquisition characteristics or older partners with greater accumulated resources) and men should prefer cues to reproductive capacity and fertility (e.g., a healthy, attractive appearance).

High levels of intrasexual variation, however, implicate complexity and trade-offs in human mate preferences (e.g., Smuts, 1989, 1991a, 1991b; Waynforth & Dunbar, 1995). In addition to providing direct resources through investment of parental care, males can also provide offspring with indirect heritable qualities (Trivers, 1972). Males possessing high heritable fitness are likely to be successful at pursuing short-term mating strategies and, as a consequence, are less likely to provide parental care and investment in long-term relationships (Waynforth, 1999). Thus, females must trade off the importance of obtaining genetic quality versus material resources in a partner (see work of Gangestad & Simpson, 2000, and Waynforth, 2001).

Most studies on human mate preferences have used samples from societies with cash economies and a division of labor in which women have historically been constrained in their participation in the workforce (e.g., Buss & Barnes, 1986; Hrdy, 1997). When women can only secure resources through a partner, they may benefit from choosing a partner with material resources over a partner with indirect heritable qualities. It has been argued that when females can access the resources necessary to raise offspring independently, the importance of male investment of resources in offspring will decrease (Cashdan, 1993; Gangestad, 1993; Low, 1990). Concordant predictions come from the social structural theory, which posits that socialization of the sexes into gender roles is responsible for sex differences in mate preferences (Eagly & Wood, 1999; Wood & Eagly, 2002); that is, men and women attempt to fill specific gender roles (female as homemaker and male as breadwinner). Mate preferences reflect attempts to maximize resources denied to each sex by gender roles. Although the social structural and “adaptive trade-offs” perspectives both predict decreased magnitudes of sex differences in mate preferences with increasing sexual equality, they offer differing explanations for the mechanisms by which these shifts would occur. The perspectives may,

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