



Original Article

A comparison of heterosexual and homosexual mating preferences in personal advertisements

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ABSTRACT

Human heterosexual mating preferences have been shown to conform to predictions drawn from evolutionary theory, with men and women adopting broadly distinct strategies. Attempts to reconcile sexual selection theory with homosexual behavior have been less consistent, however, and have largely focussed on addressing two alternative perspectives: (i) that gay men and lesbians display phenotypic traits in common with opposite sex heterosexual individuals or (ii) that homosexual individuals display sex-typical, or exaggerated sex-typical phenotypes. Testing these hypotheses is complicated by sampling issues involved in the study of human sexual orientation, since obtaining standardized and comparable samples of heterosexual and non-heterosexual mating preferences is a prerequisite to analysis. Here we present a comparison of homosexual and heterosexual mating strategies in men and women using a sample of 1733 personal ('lonely hearts') adverts gathered from a single source. We used principal components analysis in order to expose underlying structure of the advertisements, and identify three components involving relative emphasis placed on resources, physical attractiveness and personality when offering or seeking mate characteristics. While homosexual individuals are shown to resemble their own-sex heterosexual counterparts in terms of emphasis placed on partner physical attractiveness relative to partner personality, no clear pattern emerges in other aspects of advertisement strategy. Nevertheless, there we find no evidence in support of the hypothesis that homosexual men and women are intrinsically opposite-sex typical in terms of mate preferences.

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1. Introduction

Predictions concerning mate preferences in humans have often been drawn from evolutionary theory under the reasonable assumption that mating behavior, being inextricably linked to reproductive success, will have undergone selection. Human mating strategy has been shown to conform to predictions drawn from evolutionary theory, with men and women adopting broadly distinct strategies as displayed by their interest in casual sex and physical attractiveness (Buss, 1995; Gangestad & Simpson, 2000). Theories seeking to reconcile the persistence of same-sex sexual behavior in humans have, in general, emphasized the possibility that there is an aspect of homosexuality (or bisexuality) that gives an advantage to direct or indirect fitness (Camperio-Ciani, Corna, & Capiluppi, 2004; Dewar, 2003; Kirby, 2003; Kirkpatrick, 2000; McKnight, 1997). Empirical testing of these ideas has, however, failed to provide unequivocal support for any particular hypothesis regarding the evolution of homosexual behavior in humans (Kirkpatrick, 2000; Rieger & Savin-Williams, 2012).

Evolutionary studies of human mating preferences have identified several dimensions on which the preferences of heterosexual men and women differ (Buss, 1989, 1995; Shackelford, Schmitt, & Buss, 2005). In a variety of cultures, heterosexual men have been shown to place a greater emphasis on physical attractiveness than heterosexual women, who tend to place greater emphasis on status and personality in a potential partner (Buss, 1989; Buss & Angleitner, 1989; Buss & Barnes, 1986; Koyama, McGain, & Hill, 2004; Shackelford et al., 2005). Heterosexual men have also been shown to prefer partners who are younger than them, and that the age difference between 'self' and ideal partner increases as a heterosexual man ages (Kenrick & Keefe, 2011). In contrast, heterosexual women have been shown to prefer slightly older partners, while the relative difference between own and partner age remains more stable as age increases (Kenrick & Keefe, 2011; Kenrick et al., 1995). Heterosexual men also have a tendency to report more interest in and more experience of casual sex than heterosexual women, who report fewer numbers of sexual partners (Gangestad & Simpson, 2000; Schmitt, 2005), and heterosexual men have been demonstrated to seek a greater variety of short-term sexual partners (Schmitt, 2003).

Attempts to reconcile sexual selection theory with homosexual behavior have taken one of two broad theoretical positions; (i) that homosexual men and women display phenotypic traits in common

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with opposite sex heterosexual individuals, that they are opposite-sex typical; or (ii) that homosexual individuals display sex-typical, or exaggerated sex-typical phenotypes. The former position, based on observations that homosexual men and women tend to be more gender non-conforming than heterosexuals (Bailey et al., 1994; Lippa, 2002, 2008; Rieger et al., 2008), is associated with an idea that the brains of homosexual women and men have been respectively masculinized and feminized (or, more accurately, not masculinized) as a feature of their individual development (Blanchard et al., 2006; Lalumière, Blanchard, & Zucker, 2000; Rahman, 2005; Rahman & Wilson, 2003). Studies investigating this hypothesis have reported that homosexual men and women are more similar to heterosexual opposite sex than own sex counterparts in a variety of domains; homosexual men have more feminine digit length ratios (Manning, Churchill, & Peters, 2007), homosexual adults report patterns typical of the opposite sex in childhood play (Bailey & Zucker, 1995; Rieger et al., 2008), and homosexual individuals are more similar to opposite sex heterosexuals than to same sex heterosexuals in both preferences for body odours (Martins et al., 2005) and physiological response to pheromones (Savic, Berglund, & Lindström, 2005).

The alternative hypothesis, that homosexual individuals are sex-typical or sex-exaggerated, implies that the suite of behaviors that make up a mating strategy is distinct from sexual preference. This position allows for the evolution of broad, sex-typical mating strategies as the result of regular differences in selection pressures experienced by the two sexes (Buss, 1995) as they engage in sexual reproduction (which is by definition 'heterosexual'), while sexual attraction to a specific sex is the result of other, potentially biological, mechanisms which may or may not serve specific adaptive functions. In support, homosexual men and women have been shown to have similar partner age preferences as their heterosexual counterparts (Gobrogge et al., 2007; Kenrick et al., 1995). Both Glassenberg et al. (2010) and Welling et al. (2013) report similarities in the face preferences of homo- and heterosexual identified men and women. Behaviorally, gay men have also been reported to be equally interested in casual sex as heterosexual men, but to have more casual sex partners (Bailey et al., 1994). Robinson and Manning (2000) reported that gay men have more masculine digit length ratios than heterosexual men (in stark contrast to (Manning et al., 2007)), while Bogaert and Hershberger (1999) concluded that homosexual men may be hypermasculine in terms of penis circumference and length. Nevertheless, the support for either hypothesis is far from unequivocal.

One possible explanation for the array of competing evidence for the two theoretical positions may stem from the methodological difficulties in obtaining a representative sample of non-heterosexual individuals. Random sampling often does not result in a large enough sample of homo- and bisexual individuals for meaningful comparison with a heterosexual group, while targeted sampling requires individuals to self-identify in order to be included. This may bias a sample toward a group who have 'come out' and who may not be representative of the homosexual population as a whole (Sandfort, 1997; Sergeant et al., 2006). Furthermore, individuals engaged in lab-based experiments may not report their sexual orientation honestly owing to anxiety over openly declaring a homosexual or bisexual orientation (Gobrogge et al., 2007), and so be erroneously included in a heterosexual sample. The possibility that these individuals may subsequently report mating preferences that conform to cultural gender-role stereotypes (Alexander & Fisher, 2003) makes this an important methodological issue, since this may exaggerate differences between homo- and heterosexual subsamples. Attempts to recruit homosexual individuals from 'naturalistic' settings such as gay pride events or LGBTQ groups may be problematic not only because it is similarly unknown how representative such participants would be of a wider homosexual population (Sandfort, 1997), but also because comparable heterosexual sources do not exist. Since experimental groups should differ from each other on as few dimensions as

possible, this form of sampling makes drawing meaningful comparisons difficult. A further problem in the quantitative study of homosexual behavior is that decisions on what aspect of sexual orientation to measure (e.g. identity (Lippa, 2002), sexual arousal, romantic attraction (Savin-Williams & Ream, 2007), frequency of fantasy (Wichström & Hegna, 2003) or sexual experience (Fay et al., 1989)) and by which of a number of available metrics (e.g. Kinsey scales (Kinsey, Pomeroy, & Martin, 1948), Shively scales (Shively & De Cecco, 1977), the Klein grid (Klein, Sepekoff, & Wolf, 1985)), can have non-trivial effects on results (Savin-Williams, 2009).

Personal advertisements (personal ads) in newspapers address a number of the problems inherent in collecting standardized and comparable samples of heterosexual and non-heterosexual mating preferences. First, they are a source of naturalistic data in that they have been written by real-world individuals for a specific, real-world purpose (Gobrogge et al., 2007). Second, individuals have self-identified voluntarily rather than as the result of a survey question or interview. Third, drawing a sample of homosexual and heterosexual personal ads from the same publication allows for control of a number of possible confounding variables, given that newspaper readerships tend to conform to specific demographic features, including socioeconomic status and political alignment (Schoenbach et al., 1999; Webber, 1993). Homosexual readers of any given newspaper are likely to systematically differ from a heterosexual reader only in terms of their sexual orientation, thereby giving a high level of cross-sample validity. Fourth, given that personal ads are typically divided in to four categories reflective of sexual orientation (men seeking men, men seeking women, women seeking women and women seeking men) their use avoids the complex issue of classifying individuals as belonging to any particular sexual orientation using self-reported measures (Savin-Williams, 2009); they represent descriptions of homosexual or heterosexual mating strategies rather than homosexual or heterosexual individuals.

Personal ads are useful for investigating mating preferences as they represent genuine 'real world' statements of likes and dislikes, designed by an individual with the specific aim of attracting potential mates (Waynforth & Dunbar, 1995). Well validated methods exist for the analysis of personal advertisements (Thiessen, Young, & Burroughs, 1993; Waynforth & Dunbar, 1995) and they have been deployed in a number of studies on the evolution of, heterosexual (Bereczkei & Csanaky 1996; Bereczkei, Voros, Gal, & Bernath, 2010; Greenlees & McGrew 1994; Pawlowski and Dunbar, 1999; Waynforth & Dunbar 1995; Wiederman 1993) and homosexual (Bailey et al., 1997; Bailey & Zucker, 1995; Gobrogge et al., 2007; Hawkins, 1990; Kenrick et al., 1995; Russock, 2011) mate preferences.

Here we examine the alternative hypotheses that homosexual individuals should be opposite-sex or same-sex typical in terms of their mate preferences drawing on a large sample of personal ads from a single publication in order control for possible confounding variables and avoid sources of bias. Through deploying a Principal Components Analysis to expose the underlying structure of the personal ads we focus on the relative importance placed on evolutionarily salient traits—resources, commitment, personality (emphasized as important partner traits by heterosexual women) and physical attractiveness (emphasized by heterosexual men) to rigorously contrast the mating preferences of heterosexual and homosexual males and females. The use of PCA as an analytical technique in this context is novel, and may reveal more about the underlying structure of the adverts than the traditional techniques used in other, similar studies.

2. Methods

2.1. Data collection

Data were gathered from the 'Soulmates' section of multiple 1998–1999 issues of the Guide, a weekly entertainments supplement to 'the

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