

Sex differences in the jealousy-evoking nature of a rival's body build

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Abstract

This study among 185 college students showed that potential rivals with a relatively low waist-to-hip ratio (WHR) evoked more jealousy in women than in men. In contrast, rivals with a relatively high shoulder-to-hip ratio (SHR) evoked more jealousy in men than in women, particularly when the rival also had a high WHR. Rivals with a low as opposed to a high WHR were perceived as more socially dominant and attractive in both sexes, and as more physically dominant in the case of men. In addition, rivals of both sexes were perceived as more physically and socially dominant when they had a high SHR, and in the case of men as more attractive. In evaluating the rivals, women indicated that they had paid more attention to the rivals' waist, hips, and legs, and men indicated that they had paid more attention to the rivals' shoulders, chest, and belly. The results provide support for evolutionary psychological hypotheses that men and women pay attention to different bodily features in evaluating the potential threat imposed by a rival. © 2001 Elsevier Science Inc. All rights reserved.

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1. Introduction

Evolutionary psychologists have interpreted jealousy as an adaptation for preventing infidelity, elicited when people perceive threats to relationships with their partners due to actual or imagined rivals (e.g., Buss, 2000; Buunk & Dijkstra, 2000; Daly, Wilson, & Weghorst, 1982). People tend to compare rivals' qualities with their own, especially on dimensions that contribute

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to mate value, and rivals with high mate value are especially threatening (Buss, Shackelford, Choe, Dijkstra, & Buunk, 2000; Dijkstra & Buunk, 1998). For both sexes, a low waist-to-hip ratio (WHR) is an indicator of mate value, because it may serve as a predictor of several diseases, such as hypertension. However, there is abundant evidence that the WHR affects women's mate value more than men's because it is an accurate indicator of a female's reproductive status (Singh, 1993). In particular, women with a WHR in the range of 0.67–0.80 have been found both to have high reproductive capability and to be perceived as most attractive and healthy. Because higher testosterone levels in men stimulate fat deposits in the abdominal region while inhibiting fat deposits on the hips and thighs, healthy adult men generally have much higher WHRs than healthy adult women, typically between 0.85 and 0.95 (e.g., Singh, 1995). For women the "ideal" WHR lies around 0.7, while for men the ideal is approximately 0.9.

We expected that a rival with a low WHR would evoke more jealousy than one with a higher WHR in both sexes, but because of WHR's greater relevance to female mate value, we expected this to be particularly true for women. We used the stimuli developed by Singh (1993, 1995) as pictures of potential rivals, manipulating the rival's WHR by varying waist size. However, although this is the usual procedure, it unintentionally manipulates the degree of body taper as well: As the waist narrows, not only does the WHR decrease, but the body taper also seems to increase. Therefore, this procedure may not provide unequivocal evidence that it is WHR rather than body taper that is affecting ratings. This is all the more relevant as there is considerable evidence that body taper is a more important determinant of male than of female physical attractiveness. Indeed, in men much more than women, attractiveness is determined by body parts such as the chest and the shoulders, particularly by broad shoulders relative to the waist (e.g., Franzoi & Herzog, 1987; Horvath, 1979). In women, such body features may even be perceived as unattractive (Lippa, 1983). The reason why a high degree of body taper contributes heavily to male, but not to female, mate value may be that this reflects levels of physical dominance, a feature highly valued by women, but not by men, in a mate. There is indeed medical evidence that the pelvic–shoulder ratio correlates positively with beta-lipoproteins, hormones that are related to testosterone levels and muscle development in men (e.g., Evans, 1972). In line with Horvath (1979), among others, we manipulated body taper by varying the shoulder-to-hip ratio (SHR). While we expected rivals with lower WHRs to evoke more jealousy in females than in males, we expected rivals with higher SHRs to evoke more jealousy in males than in females. Furthermore, we expected that among females more than among males, rivals with low WHRs would be perceived as more attractive, and that among males more than among females, rivals with higher SHRs would be perceived as more dominant. Finally, we asked participants which body parts they had paid attention to while evaluating the rivals.

2. Method

2.1. *Participants and procedure*

An experimenter handed out questionnaires to undergraduate students who were studying in the university library. Participants were told that they would participate in a study on the

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