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Aggressor or protector? Experiences and perceptions of violence predict preferences for masculinity

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Aggressor or protector? Experiences and perceptions of violence predict preferences for masculinity.

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Abstract

Women’s preferences for masculine male partners have been explained in terms of heritable health. The evidence between masculinity and health, however, is controversial and therefore, alternative explanations for masculinity preferences reflecting income inequality and protection from violence have been proposed. This study thus aimed to test the effect of exposure to violence (i.e., experiences of robberies and perceptions of danger) on the individual masculinity preferences of women and men from the capital city of Colombia, Bogota, and surrounding small towns. One hundred and fifty three adult participants (mean age +/- S.D. = 31.3 +/- 9.4), all heterosexual, were surveyed in reference to indicators related to health (e.g., drinking water access, frequency of illnesses), access to media (e.g., television and internet access), education (e.g., graduating from high school, attending university) and exposure to violence (e.g., frequency of robberies/attacks, feelings of danger from violence). Participants made two alternative, preference forced-choice for masculinized and feminized versions of both rural Salvadoran and European male faces. We found that men and women exposed to higher levels of violence preferred less masculine male faces, although this effect was only significant for women. Additionally, the effect of violence exposure was more relevant for the Salvadoran stimuli. Violence contributed significantly to explaining masculinity preferences after controlling for participant age, education, access to media, and health-related factors. These preferences may reflect women’s strategy to avoid male violence demonstrating that exposure to violence matters in interpersonal attraction.

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