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Conditional mate preferences: Factors influencing preferences for height

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Abstract

Physical stature plays an important role in human mate choice because it may signal dominance, high status, access to resources, and underlying heritable qualities. Although past research has examined overall preferences for height, we propose these preferences are modified by evolved mechanisms that consider one's own height and prevailing social norms. We examined this proposal using samples of 2000 personal ads and 382 undergraduates. Both sexes preferred relationships where the woman was shorter when specifying the shortest acceptable, tallest acceptable, and ideal dating partner. In the personal ads sample, this norm was more strongly enforced by women than by men: 23% of men compared to only 4% of women would accept a dating relationship where the woman was taller. Preferences for the male-taller norm were less pronounced in short men and tall women, who shifted towards preferring someone closer to their own height. This limited their potential dating pool but ensured they would select a mate within the typical range of variation for height. Surprisingly, endorsement of traditional gender role norms was only weakly related

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to height preferences, particularly for women. These findings highlight the utility of examining how evolutionary factors, including endorsement of social norms, may influence mate preferences.

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1. Introduction

Do all individuals have a different vision of the ideal body, or is there a high degree of systematic variation in what we find attractive? Over the past several decades evolutionary social scientists have examined how individual differences, contextual factors, and socially transmitted information shape what we find desirable in a mate (Gangestad, Haselton, & Buss, 2006). This research has demonstrated that mate preferences are influenced by factors such as exposure to new social norms (Tovee, Swami, Furnham, & Mangalparsad, 2006), the prevalence of pathogens in the environment (Gangestad et al., 2006), whether one is considering a mate as a short-term sexual partner or long-term dating partner (Buss & Schmitt, 1993), and even a woman's ovulatory phase (Gangestad, Thornhill, & Garver-Apgar, 2005). These findings support the proposal that evolutionary processes have crafted a flexible set of *conditional* mate preferences rather than a rigid and fixed set of criteria for attractiveness.

Considering conditional mate preferences is particularly critical when investigating preferences for height. We propose that although there are general preferences for taller-than-average men, preferences for height are strongly influenced by one's sex, height, and endorsement of traditional gender role norms. Below we investigate what predictions can be derived from existing theoretical perspectives regarding preferences for absolute and relative height of a dating partner.

2. Factors Relating to Absolute Preferences for Height

2.1. Preferences for male height

Many women express a preference for males displaying "masculinized" traits that require high levels of testosterone to produce, such as facial masculinity (Johnston, Hagel, Franklin, Fink, & Grammer, 2001) and muscularity (Frederick & Haselton, 2007). Presumably, this preference evolved because testosterone-linked traits are costly to produce in terms of increased metabolic rate and immunosuppression, and therefore signal the presence of positive heritable qualities that can be transmitted to offspring (see Kaplan & Gangestad, 2005). Support for this heritable fitness perspective comes from research showing that women prefer these traits most strongly when the only benefits they might receive are genetic, such as in a short-term mate (Frederick & Haselton, 2007; Johnston et al., 2001) or when they are most likely to conceive, during the fertile phase of their ovulatory cycle (Gangestad et al., 2005).

Drawing from this logic, tall stature may index heritable fitness because only individuals with certain heritable qualities can afford to allocate energetic costs away from other processes

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