



Mate value and mate preferences: An investigation into decisions made with and without constraints

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ABSTRACT

Studies have long investigated similarities and differences in men's and women's mate preferences. This study sought to expand on previous research by investigating whether mate value moderated participants' design of mates. Using both a budgeted and a non-budgeted mate design task, we investigated the effect of mate value on the design of a mate. We found that mate value consistently predicted the design of a mate in an unbudgeted task, whereas we found more mixed results in the budgeted task. Ultimately, it appears that participants with a higher level of mate value are more demanding in their design of a mate.

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1. Introduction

Investigations into what individuals want in a mate have a long history in both social and evolutionary psychology. Some researchers have highlighted differences between men's and women's preferences (e.g. Buss, 1989; Sprecher, Sullivan, & Hatfield, 1994). For instance, Buss (1989) found that men worldwide tend to desire a younger mate whereas women tend to prefer an older mate; importantly, these preferences were found to reflect actual behaviors as assessed by the age of partners at the time of marriage. Other researchers (e.g. Klohnen & Mendelsohn, 1998; Lippa, 2007) have focused more on the similarities between men and women in partner choice. For instance, Lippa (2007) found that an intelligent partner was the most important trait for both men and women.

One innovative approach adopted by some researchers is to ask participants to design a desired mate. However, the approaches to mate design have varied across researchers. For instance, Kenrick, Sadall, Groth, and Trost (1990) used an unbudgeted mate design task where participants were presented with 22 traits that might be desirable in a mate. Participants were then allowed to assign as much or as little of each trait to specify their minimally acceptable and ideal traits in a potential mate. Ultimately, Kenrick et al. (1990) found five mate preference factors. These factors (status, physical attractiveness, friendliness, health, and family orientation) replicated across men and women, although there were differences between men and women in the minimum level acceptable (men would accept a lower quality mate than women

would, although this difference was attenuated in marriage partners).

Other researchers have used a budgeted approach to the mate design task (reflecting the real world constraint that the prevalence of the highest quality mates is low). Li, Bailey, Kenrick, and Linsenmeier (2002) investigated men's and women's mate preferences and found that when participants had ample opportunities to assign mate characteristics to an imagined partner, men and women had similar patterns of preferences (similar to Kenrick et al. (1990)). However, when using a smaller budget, a sex difference emerged such that men focused on attractiveness, whereas women focused on resources (similar to many of the findings in the evolutionary psychology literature; see Kenrick & Keefe, 1992).

Apart from comparing men and women, Kenrick et al. (1990) and Li et al. (2002) did not investigate the effect of any individual difference variables on men's and women's preferences. One individual difference that could potentially moderate participants' mate preferences is mate value.

Mate value is a construct that broadly describes one's value as a mate to a potential (or actual) partner. Across the literature, mate value has been assessed a number of different ways. For instance, Kurzban and Weeden (2005) used physical attractiveness as a proxy for mate value. Other researchers have tried to more holistically assess mate value. For instance, Brase and Guy (2004) designed a one-item mate value scale (the Mate Value Single Item Scale, MVSIS) that attempts to tap many of the components of mate value. Another approach (the Mate Value Inventory, MVI; Kirsner, Figueredo, & Jacobs, 2003) has looked at the individual components that make up one's own mate value, which are then summed to a total mate value score. An advantage to these approaches is that they assess many of the separate components of

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mate value without unduly focusing on just one part (please see Fisher, Cox, Bennett, and Gavric (2008) for a similar approach).

A recent investigation into the psychometric properties of the MVI and MVSIS revealed several issues (Edlund, 2008). For instance, when subjecting the 34-item MVI to a CFA (five different models were tested), the one-factor solution proposed by Kirsner et al. (2003) was not supported. Instead, a five-factor model (family orientation, friendliness, health, physical attractiveness, and status) with no higher-order factor best fit the data.¹ The χ^2 statistic for this model ($\chi^2 = 401.81$, $p < 0.001$) was significant; however, the χ^2/df ratio (3.21) is considered adequate (Kline, 2005). The values of the CFI (0.90) and IFI (0.90) also meet the threshold (0.90) for good model fit. Last, the RMSEA statistic (0.078) is also considered to be acceptable. Additionally, Edlund (2008) demonstrated that the five factors had respectable concurrent, convergent, and discriminant validities. The MVSIS also showed evidence of concurrent, convergent, and discriminant validities. In addition, the factors of the MVI had strong internal consistency.

In this study, we investigated whether men and women of differential levels of mate value have different mating preferences. In line with Kenrick et al. (1990) and Li et al. (2002) approaches, we were interested in minimum and ideal mate preferences and how individuals of different mate values might differentially design a mate when no external constraints are applied and when under the constraints of a budgeted task.

2. Method

2.1. Participants

One hundred and seventy-one students participated in this study. There were 59 men and 112 women (two participants did not self-report gender); mean age of participants in this study was 22.60 years ($SD = 4.87$). There were 122 Caucasians, 15 African Americans, 12 Hispanics, 8 Asian Americans, 11 self-identified others, and 3 who did not self-report ethnicity. Twelve participants were excluded from all analyses for failing to complete a majority of the study, including the two who did not self-report gender. Additionally, eight participants were excluded from the analyses for failing to understand the task (e.g. some indicated higher minimum characteristics than ideal characteristics).

2.2. Procedure

Participants completed the study in the laboratory and in several classrooms. Participants were first asked to assign a minimum level and an ideal level of the different characteristics they would like to see in a mate (based on Kenrick et al., 1990). Participants responded to four levels of mating situations (single date partner, sexual only partner, steady dating partner, and marriage partner). In this portion of the study, participants designed their ideal and minimally acceptable mates to have any level of 22 traits (please see Kenrick et al., 1990), for the full list of traits). Importantly, there were no restrictions on how high they could set the levels of the traits when they designed their mates. The order of presentation of the different mating situations was counterbalanced across participants.

¹ Using the 34-item version of the MVI, the following items loaded on the various factors. Friendliness: #13 – give partner a say in the relationship, #17 – have a good sense of humor, #30 – sociable, attractiveness: #5 – attractive face, #15 – good body, #18 – have sex appeal/sexy, status: #3 – assertive/forceful personality, #21 – influential, #26 – now have financial resources, #31 – social status, #33 – successful, #34 – will have financial resources, health: #1 – active, #19 – healthy, #27 – physically fit, family orientation: #6 – desire children, #9 – enjoy spending time with children, #16 – good parenting skills.

After assigning minimum and ideal mate values, participants completed the mate preferences budgeting task (adapted from Li et al. (2002)). In this task, participants had three different budgets (low, medium, and high) and could design a mate using points based on their budget. Participants could assign points to 13 traits (creativity, friendliness, intelligence, interesting personality, kindness, liveliness, physical attractiveness, romance, sense of humor, special non-work talents, social level, work ethic and, yearly income), and each point allocated to a trait represented +10% relative to the population. For example, a mate with seven points allocated to attractiveness would be at the 70th percentile in attractiveness (i.e., more attractive than 70% of the population). The low, medium, and high budget tasks gave the participants 20, 40, and 60 points to allocate, respectively. Participants could not spend more than 10 points (100%) on any individual trait, and even in the high budget task, participants did not have enough points to design mates with maximum levels on every trait.

Upon completion of the mate preference tasks, participants were given the MVI (we used the five factors identified in Edlund (2008); these factors are: family orientation, friendliness, health, physical attractiveness, and status), the MVSIS, as well as demographic questions. It is worth noting that the factor structure found in study one of Edlund (2008) was replicated and the reliabilities of the five factors were nearly identical (friendliness, $\alpha = 0.63$; physical attractiveness, $\alpha = 0.81$; status, $\alpha = 0.74$; healthiness, $\alpha = 0.80$; family orientation, $\alpha = 0.79$).

3. Results

3.1. Unbudgeted mate task

Our first analysis of interest was a preliminary look at the factor structure of the different items included in each block of the unbudgeted task. We investigated whether mate qualities represented a single construct (ideal [minimum] mate) or whether there were separate factors within the preferences. Using the scree test, results from each of the exploratory factor analyses suggested that there were two factors present in each of the mate preference blocks (we used the Promax rotation technique). All of the primary eigenvalues for the two factors were between 9.5 and 10.9; the closest second factor had an eigenvalue that was typically near 3.0, and all of the tertiary factors were below 1.0. The first factor, which could best be titled “Tangible items,” included: college degree, dominance, earning capacity, good heredity, good housekeeper, popular, powerful, religious, status, and wealthy. The second factor, which could best be titled “Abstracted items,” included: attractiveness, easygoing, emotionally stable, exciting personality, friendliness, healthy, intelligence, kind and understanding, sense of humor, and sexy. Two items (creative and wants children) were massively cross-loaded between the factors; hence, they were excluded from the analyses. We then subjected these factors to further analysis.

Analysis of the unbudgeted mate design task consisted of a series of mixed-model ANOVA (between subject factors: gender and mate value measure; within subject factors: ideal/minimum comparison (2), type of relationship (4), and abstracted/tangible traits (2)) where the various individual difference measures (the five factors of the MVI and the MVSIS) were entered in separate equations.

Collapsing across all levels, there are several main effects. Not surprisingly (and in line with previous findings), there was a main effect of standard (ideal vs. minimum acceptable) such that participants had higher expectations for their ideal partner than their minimally acceptable partner, $F(1,150) = 4.765$, $p < 0.05$. There was also a significant main effect of type of relationship, $F(3,150) = 25.502$, $p < 0.01$. Participants had the highest requested

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