

Human mate preferences

Mate choice is a topic of behavior that has received considerable attention over the past decade or so, and has generated much controversy. Darwin (1871) described the process of sexual selection, and documented the typical pattern of sexually selected behavioral traits. Males compete with one another for access to females, and are aggressively eager to copulate with any available female. Females, in contrast, are relatively passive and are very particular about the males they mate with. Darwin went on to describe many characteristics of males that have presumably evolved through the action of female choice.

In 1972, R. L. Trivers proposed that the dichotomy between male and female behavior is the result of a fundamental discrepancy between the genders in parental investment, which he defined as any investment of time, energy, or risk that an animal makes to enhance the survival and eventual reproduction of an offspring. He predicted that females, because of their relatively great investment in offspring, should exercise choice among potential mates, and that males, because they invest little in each offspring, should attempt to mate indiscriminately with any female available.

This dichotomy is indistinct in species where males make a considerable investment in offspring. In this situation, males might be expected to choose among potential mates on the basis of reproductive characteristics, among other traits. Both males and females exercise preferences that tend to maximize their reproductive success, but the characteristics that are preferred differ between the genders. For instance, in Mormon crickets (which in spite of this common name are not crickets and have no religious affiliation), males provide a spermatophore that contains, in addition to sperm, a nutritious bolus of material upon which the female feeds while sperm are being transferred into her reproductive tract. The spermatophore represents a considerable parental investment on the part of the male; it may be up to 27% of his body mass. In this situation, males are expected to exercise some preference among potential mates. This is in fact the case. Males prefer to mate with females that are larger than the population average. These females are more fecund, so the males' preference increases their fitness. Females prefer males with larger spermatophores, and thus more nutrition, which increases their fitness.

In most human cultures (even the polygynous ones), males make considerable investment of resources in their offspring. They are expected to have behaviors that tend to insure confidence of paternity, but they are also expected to make choices among potential mates. Females who rely in large part on male parental investment to raise their offspring are also expected to be choosy about their mate. However, the characteristics of human males that promote the fitness of females are not the same as the characteristics of human females that promote the fitness of males. We expect gender differences in mate preferences, and might be able to predict in a general way the characteristics that would be important for females and for males. If female fitness is dependent on resources provided by the male, females should prefer males that have higher "resource holding potential," however that is measured in the culture in question. If male fitness depends on the ability of his mate(s) to produce offspring, males should prefer females that have high potential fecundity or high lifetime reproductive value. Thus the criteria that are important in mate choice should be different for females and males.

Based on these types of arguments, a group of researchers led by David Buss of the University of Texas devised a "mate preference questionnaire" that has been administered to over 10,000 individuals of 37 different cultures. The results are overwhelming. Males rate good looks, good health, and chastity as the most desirable characteristics in a mate; females rate good financial prospects, favorable social status, and ambition and industriousness as the most important characteristics in a mate. These preferences are culturally universal: they are consistently shared by males and females of many diverse cultures. The preferences of females and males also coincide with our predictions about mate preferences based on fitness.

Our purpose for this lab is to sample the mate preferences of Austin College students. We will develop a questionnaire and administer it to a sample of our fellow humans. We should be careful in this case about pseudoreplication; no individual should respond twice to the questionnaire. We must also take care to preserve the confidentiality of the responses; respondents should make no identifying marks on the survey form. We should also be sure to have roughly equal numbers of male and female respondents. Our results will be an average importance ranking for each of our questionnaire items for males and females; we will be able to compare the importance of the characteristics statistically.

Mate preference questionnaire

Please evaluate the importance of the following factors in choosing a mate:

Evaluation scale: 3 = essential
 2 = important, but not essential
 1 = desirable, but not very important
 0 = irrelevant or unimportant

Factors:

- 1)___ Good cook or housekeeper
- 2)___ Desire for home and children
- 3)___ Pleasing disposition
- 4)___ Favorable social status or rating
- 5)___ Sense of humor
- 6)___ Good looks
- 7)___ Common interests
- 8)___ Similar educational background
- 9)___ Similar religious background
- 10)___ Cleanliness, good grooming
- 11)___ Ambition and industriousness
- 12)___ Fidelity
- 13)___ Good financial prospect
- 14)___ Honesty, trustworthiness
- 15)___ Similar political background
- 16)___ Chastity
- 17)___ Mutual attraction/love
- 18)___ Dependable character
- 19)___ Good health/healthy lifestyle
- 20)___ Emotional stability and maturity
- 21)___ Education and intelligence

Gender of respondent:

Age of respondent:

Marital status of respondent: