

The Strategies of Human Mating

A theory of human sexual strategies accounts for the observation that people worldwide are attracted to the same qualities in the opposite sex

David M. Buss

What do men and women want in a mate? Is there anything consistent about human behavior when it comes to the search for a mate? Would a Gujarati of India be attracted to the same traits in a mate as a Zulu of South Africa or a college student in the midwestern United States?

As a psychologist working in the field of human personality and mating preferences, I have come across many attempts to answer such questions and provide a coherent explanation of human mating patterns. Some theories have suggested that people search for mates who resemble archetypal images of the opposite-sex parent (à la Freud and Jung), or mates with characteristics that are either complementary or similar to one's own qualities, or mates with whom to make an equitable exchange of valuable resources.

These theories have played important roles in our understanding of human mating patterns, but few of them have provided specific predictions that can be tested. Fewer still consider the origins and functions of an individual's mating preferences. What possible function is there to mating with an individual who is an archetypal image of one's opposite-sex parent? Most theories also tend to assume that the processes that guide the mating preferences of men and women are identical, and no sex-differentiated predictions can be derived. The context of the mating behavior is also frequently ignored; the same mating tendencies are posited regardless of circumstances.

Despite the complexity of human mating behavior, it is possible to address these issues in a single, coherent theory. David Schmitt of the University of Michigan and I have recently proposed a framework for understanding the logic of human mating patterns from the standpoint of evolutionary theory. Our theory makes several predictions about the behavior of men and women in the context of their respective sexual strategies. In particular, we discuss the changes that occur when men and women shift their goals from short-term mating (casual sex) to long-term mating (a committed relationship).

Some of the studies we discuss are based on surveys of male and female college students in the United States. In these instances, the sexual attitudes of the sample population may not be reflective of the behavior of people in other cultures. In other instances, however, the results represent a much broader spectrum of the human population. In collaboration with 50 other scientists, we surveyed the mating preferences of more than 10,000 men and women in 37 countries over a six-year period spanning 1984 through 1989. Although no survey, short of canvassing the entire human population, can be considered exhaustive, our study crosses a tremendous diversity of geographic, cultural, political, ethnic, religious, racial and economic groups. It is the largest survey ever on mate preferences.

What we found is contrary to much current thinking among social scientists, which holds that the process of choosing a mate is highly culture-bound. Instead, our results are consistent with the notion that human beings, like other animals, exhibit species-typical desires when it comes to the selection of a mate. These patterns can be accounted for by our theory of human sexual strategies.

Competition and Choice

Sexual-strategies theory holds that patterns in mating behavior exist because they are evolutionarily advantageous. We are obviously the descendants of people who were able to mate successfully. Our theory assumes that the sexual strategies of our ancestors evolved because they permitted them to survive and produce offspring. Those people who failed to mate successfully because they did not express these strategies are not our ancestors. One simple example is the urge to mate, which is a universal desire among people in all cultures and which is undeniably evolutionary in origin.

Although the types of behavior we consider are more complicated than simply the urge to mate, a brief overview of the relevant background should be adequate to understand the evolutionary logic of human mating strategies.

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Figure 1. Species-typical mating preferences are expressed by the American businessman Donald Trump and his new wife Marla Maples, here evoking an image of the ideal family for readers of *Vanity Fair*. The traits of a desirable mate appear to be consistent throughout the world: Men prefer to mate with beautiful young women, whereas women prefer to mate with men who have resources and social status. The author argues that these traits offer evolutionarily adaptive advantages to the opposite-sex mate, which account for their ubiquitous desirability.

As with many issues in evolutionary biology, this background begins with the work of Charles Darwin.

Darwin was the first to show that mate preferences could affect human evolution. In his

seminal 1871 treatise, *The Descent of Man and Selection in Relation to Sex*, Darwin puzzled over characteristics that seemed to be perplexing when judged merely on the basis of their relative advantage for the animal's survival. How

Michael Comte (Courtesy of *Vanity Fair* © 1994 The Condé Nast Publications Inc.)

type of mating	men's reproductive challenges	women's reproductive challenges
short-term	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • partner number • identifying women who are sexually accessible • minimizing cost, risk and commitment • identifying women who are fertile 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • immediate resource extraction • evaluating short-term mates as possible long-term mates • attaining men with high-quality genes • cultivating potential backup mates
long-term	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • paternity confidence • assessing a woman's reproductive value • commitment • identifying women with good parenting skills • attaining women with high-quality genes 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • identifying men who are able and willing to invest • physical protection from aggressive men • identifying men who will commit • identifying men with good parenting skills • attaining men with high-quality genes

Figure 2. Mate-selection problems of men and women differ in short-term mating (casual sex) and long-term mating (a committed relationship) because each gender faces a unique set of reproductive challenges. In short-term mating contexts, a man's reproductive success is constrained by the number of fertile women he can inseminate. A man must solve the specialized problems of identifying women who are sexually accessible, identifying women who are fecund, and minimizing commitment and investment in order to effectively pursue short-term matings. In contrast, a woman's short-term mating strategy involves identifying men who would be good long-term mates, identifying men who have "high-quality" genes (are evolutionarily fit), extracting resources from a short-term mate and cultivating potential backup mates. In long-term mating contexts, men must identify women who have high reproductive value, good parenting skills and "high-quality" genes. Men must also assure that they are the father of their mate's offspring. In contrast, women must identify long-term mates who are willing and able to invest resources, can provide physical protection, have good parenting skills and have "high-quality" genes. Because men and women face different reproductive challenges, each gender has evolved different sexual strategies and is attracted to different qualities in the opposite sex.

could the brilliant plumage of a male peacock evolve when it obviously increases the bird's risk of predation? Darwin's answer was sexual selection, the evolution of characteristics that confer a reproductive advantage to an organism (rather than a survival advantage). Darwin further divided sexual selection into two processes: intrasexual competition and preferential mate choice.

Intrasexual competition is the less controversial of the two processes. It involves competition between members of the same sex to gain preferential access to mating partners. Characteristics that lead to success in these same-sex competitions—such as greater strength, size, agility, confidence or cunning—can evolve simply because of the reproductive advantage gained by the victors. Darwin assumed that this is primarily a competitive interaction between males, but recent studies suggest that human females are also very competitive for access to mates.

Preferential mate choice, on the other hand, involves the desire for mating with partners that possess certain characteristics. A consensual desire affects the evolution of characteristics because it gives those possessing the desired characteristics an advantage in obtaining mates over those who do not possess the desired characteristics. Darwin assumed that

preferential mate choice operates primarily through females who prefer particular males. (Indeed, he even called this component of sexual selection *female choice*.)

Darwin's theory of mate-choice selection was controversial in part because Darwin simply assumed that females desire males with certain characteristics. Darwin failed to document how such desires might have arisen and how they might be maintained in a population.

The solution to the problem was not forthcoming until 1972, when Robert Trivers, then at Harvard University, proposed that the relative parental investment of the sexes influences the two processes of sexual selection. Specifically, the sex that invests more in offspring is selected to be more discriminating in choosing a mate, whereas the sex that invests less in offspring is more competitive with members of the same sex for sexual access to the high-investing sex. Parental-investment theory accounts, in part, for both the origin and the evolutionary retention of different sexual strategies in males and females.

Consider the necessary *minimum* parental investment by a woman. After internal fertilization, the gestation period lasts about nine months and is usually followed by lactation, which in tribal societies typically can last several years. In contrast, a man's minimum parental investment can

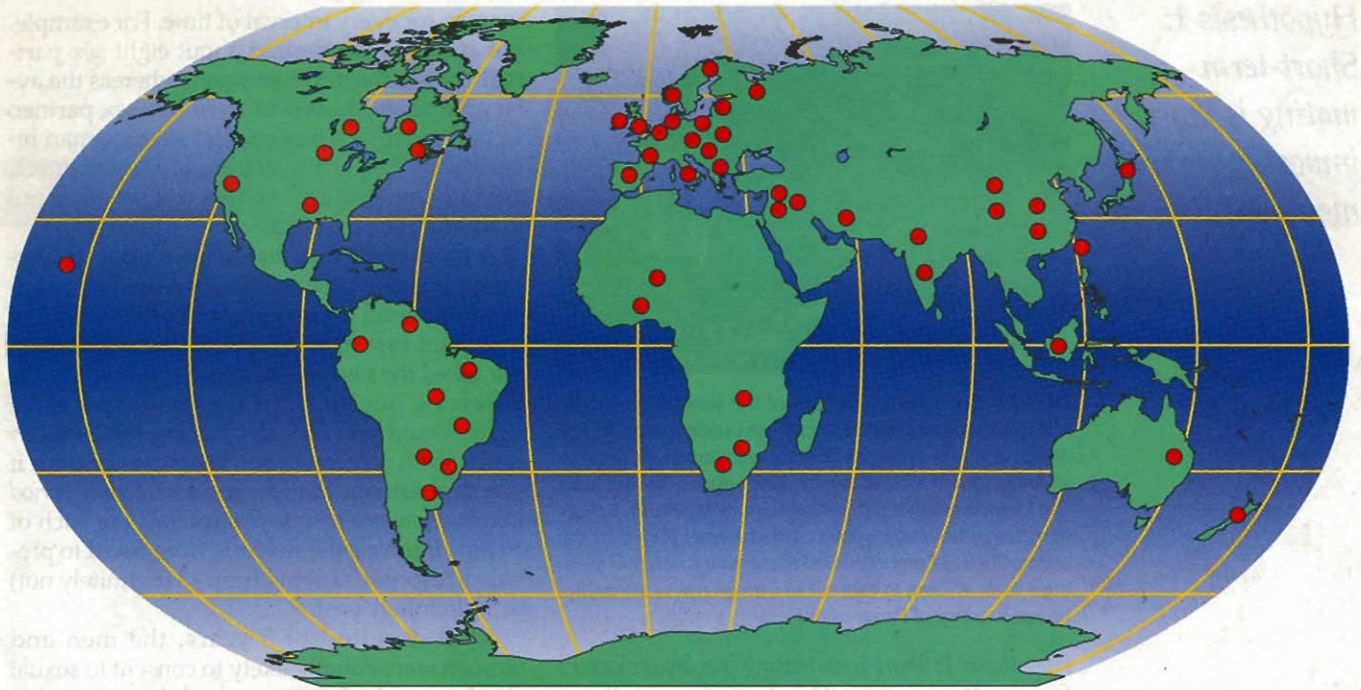


Figure 3. Thirty-seven cultures, distributed as shown above, were examined by the author in his international study of male and female mating preferences. The author and his colleagues surveyed the mating desires of 10,047 people on six continents and five islands. The results provide the largest data base of human mating preferences ever accumulated.

be reduced to the contribution of sperm, an effort requiring as little time as a few minutes. This disparity in parental investment means that the replacement of a child who dies (or is deserted) typically costs more (in time and energy) for women than men. Parental-investment theory predicts that women will be more choosy and selective about their mating partners. Where men can provide resources, women should desire those who are able and willing to commit those resources to her and her children.

Sexual Strategies

Our evolutionary framework is based on three key ingredients. First, human mating is inherently strategic. These strategies exist because they solved specific problems in human evolutionary history. It is important to recognize that the manifestation of these strategies need not be through conscious psychological mechanisms. Indeed, for the most part we are completely unaware of *why* we find certain qualities attractive in a mate. A second component of our theory is that mating strategies are context-dependent. People behave differently depending on whether the situation presents itself as a short-term or long-term mating prospect. Third, men and women have faced different mating problems over the course of human evolution and, as a consequence, have evolved different strategies.

As outlined here, sexual strategies theory consists of nine hypotheses. We can test these hypotheses by making several predictions about the behavior of men and women faced with a particular mating situation. Even though we

make only a few predictions for each hypothesis, it should be clear that many more predictions can be derived to test each hypothesis. We invite the reader to devise his or her own tests of these hypotheses.

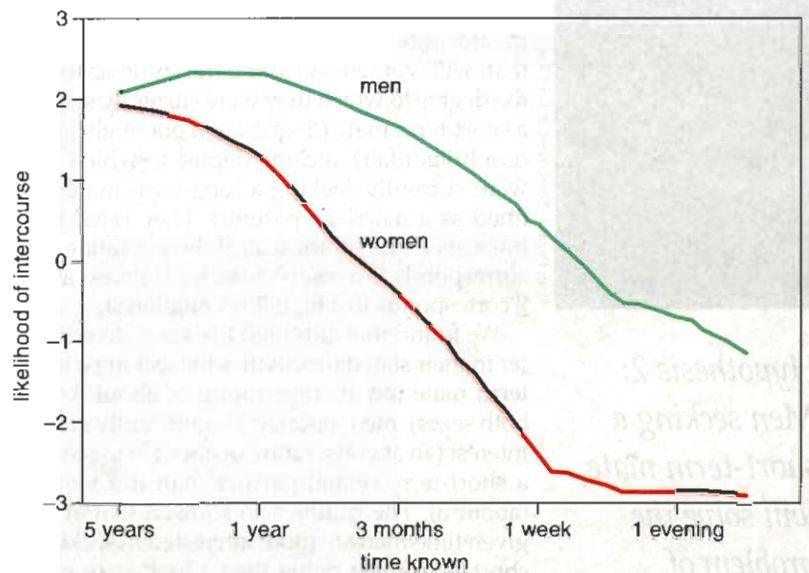


Figure 4. Willingness to have sexual intercourse (measured on a scale from 3, *definitely yes*, to -3, *definitely no*) differs for men and women with respect to the length of time they have been acquainted with their prospective mate. Although men and women are equally likely to engage in sexual intercourse after knowing a mate for five years (both responding with a score of about 2, *probably yes*), women are significantly less inclined to have sex with a prospective mate for all shorter lengths of time. The average man was positive about having intercourse with a woman even after knowing her for only one week, whereas the average women was highly unlikely to have intercourse after such a brief period of time. The data are based on a sample of 148 college students in the midwestern United States. The results support the hypothesis that short-term mating is more important for men than for women.

Hypothesis 1:
Short-term
mating is more
important for
men than women.

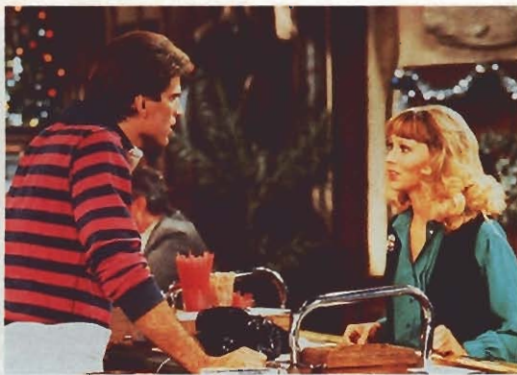


Figure 5. Stereotypical images of the womanizing male and the marriage-minded female are caricatures of the underlying sexual strategies of men and women. In the television program *Cheers* the character played by the actor Ted Danson exhibited the short-term male sexual strategy of mating with many women. The character played by the actress Shelley Long exhibited the female strategy of seeking a male willing to commit to a long-term relationship. Image courtesy of Paramount Pictures.

Hypothesis 1: Short-term mating is more important for men than women. This hypothesis follows from the fact that men can reduce their parental investment to the absolute minimum and still produce offspring. Consequently, short-term mating should be a key component of the sexual strategies of men, and much less so for women. We tested three predictions based on this hypothesis in a sample of 148 college students (75 men and 73 women) in the midwestern United States.

First, we predict that men will express a greater interest in seeking a short-term mate than will women. We asked the students to rate the degree to which they were currently seeking a short-term mate (defined as a one-night stand or a brief affair) and the degree to which they were currently seeking a long-term mate (defined as a marriage partner). They rated their interests on a 7-point scale, where a rating of 1 corresponds to a complete lack of interest and a 7 corresponds to a high level of interest.

We found that although the sexes do not differ in their stated proclivities for seeking a long-term mate (an average rating of about 3.4 for both sexes), men reported a significantly greater interest (an average rating of about 5) in seeking a short-term sexual partner than did women (about 3). The results also showed that at any given time men are more interested in seeking a short-term mate rather than a long-term mate, whereas women are more interested in seeking a long-term mate than a short-term mate.

Second we predict that men will desire a greater number of mates than is desired by women. We asked the same group of college students how many sexual partners they would ideally like to have during a given time interval and during their lifetimes. In this instance men consistently reported that they desired a greater number of sex partners than reported by the

women for every interval of time. For example, the average man desired about eight sex partners during the next two years, whereas the average woman desired to have one sex partner. In the course of a lifetime, the average man reported the desire to have about 18 sex partners, whereas the average woman desired no more than 4 or 5 sex partners.

A third prediction that follows from this hypothesis is that men will be more willing to engage in sexual intercourse a shorter period of time after first meeting a potential sex partner. We asked the sample of 148 college students the following question: "If the conditions were right, would you consider having sexual intercourse with someone you viewed as desirable if you had known that person for (a time period ranging from one hour to five years)?" For each of 10 time intervals the students were asked to provide a response ranging from -3 (definitely not) to 3 (definitely yes).

After a period of 5 years, the men and women were equally likely to consent to sexual relations, each giving a score of about 2 (probably yes). For all shorter time intervals, men were consistently more likely to consider sexual intercourse. For example, after knowing a potential sex partner for only one week, the average man was still positive about the possibility of having sex, whereas women said that they were highly unlikely to have sex with someone after knowing him for only one week.

This issue was addressed in a novel way by Russell Clark and Elaine Hatfield of the University of Hawaii. They designed a study in which college students were approached by an attractive member of the opposite sex who posed one of three questions after a brief introduction: "Would you go out on a date with me tonight?" "Would you go back to my apartment with me tonight?" or "Would you have sex with me tonight?"

Of the women who were approached, 50 percent agreed to the date, 6 percent agreed to go to the apartment and none agreed to have sex. Many women found the sexual request from a virtual stranger to be odd or insulting. Of the men approached, 50 percent agreed to the date, 69 percent agreed to go back to the woman's apartment and 75 percent agreed to have sex. In contrast to women, many men found the sexual request flattering. Those few men who declined were apologetic about it, citing a fiancée or an unavoidable obligation that particular evening. Apparently, men are willing to solve the problem of partner number by agreeing to have sex with virtual strangers.

Hypothesis 2: Men seeking a short-term mate will solve the problem of identifying women who are sexually accessible. We can make at least two predictions based on this hypothesis. First, men will value qualities that signal immediate sexual accessibility in a short-term mate highly, and less



Alain Evraud (Photo Researchers, Inc.)

Hypothesis 2:
Men seeking a
short-term mate
will solve the
problem of
identifying
women who are
sexually
accessible.



Figure 6. Prostitution is a worldwide phenomenon that is partly a consequence of the short-term mating strategy of males. The relatively rapid exchange of sex and money solves the short-term mating problems of males who can minimize the commitment of resources and quickly identify women who are sexually accessible. Above and on the facing page, interactions on Patpong Street (the prostitution district) in Bangkok play out a scene that is repeated daily in cities around the world.

so in a long-term mate. When we asked men in a college sample of 44 men and 42 women to rate the desirability of promiscuity and sexual experience in a mate, both were significantly more valued in a short-term mate. Although men find promiscuity mildly desirable in a short-term mate, it is clearly undesirable in a long-term mate. It is noteworthy that women find promiscuity extremely undesirable in either context.

We also predict that qualities that signal sexual inaccessibility will be disliked by men seeking short-term mates. We asked men to rate the desirability of mates who have a low sex drive, who are prudish or who lack sexual experience. In each instance men expressed a particular dislike for short-term mates with these qualities. A low sex drive and prudishness are also disliked by men in long-term mates, but less so. In contrast, a lack of sexual experience is slightly valued by men in a long-term mate.

Hypothesis 3: Men seeking a short-term mate will minimize commitment and investment. Here we predict that men will find undesirable any cues

that signal that a short-term mate wants to extract a commitment. We asked the same group of 44 men to rate the variable *wants a commitment* for short-term and long-term mates. Of all the qualities we addressed, this one showed the most striking dependence on context. The attribute of wanting a commitment was strongly desirable in a long-term mate but strongly undesirable in a short-term mate. This distinction was not nearly so strong for women. Although women strongly wanted commitment from a long-term mate, it was only mildly undesirable in a short-term mate.

Hypotheses 4 and 5: Men seeking a short-term mate will solve the problem of identifying fertile women, whereas men seeking a long-term mate will solve the problem of identifying reproductively valuable women. Because these hypotheses are closely linked it is useful to discuss them together. Fertility and reproductive value are related yet distinct concepts. Fertility refers to the probability that a woman is *currently* able to conceive a child. Reproductive value, on the other hand, is defined actuarially in units of expected future

Hypothesis 3: Men seeking a short-term mate will minimize commitment and investment.



Courtesy of The Museum of Modern Art Film Stills Archive



Spencer Grant (Photo Researchers, Inc.)

Hypothesis 4:
Men seeking a short-term mate will solve the problem of identifying fertile women.

Figure 7. Beautiful young women are sexually attractive to men because beauty and youth are closely linked with fertility and reproductive value. In evolutionary history, males who were able to identify and mate with fertile females had the greatest reproductive success. These three young women were photographed at a “ferm bar” in Newport Beach, California.

reproduction. In other words, it is the extent to which persons of a given age and sex will contribute, on average, to the ancestry of future generations. For example, a 14-year-old woman has a higher reproductive value than a 24-year-old woman, because her *future* contribution to the gene pool is higher on average. In contrast, the 24-year-old woman is more fertile than the 14-year-old because her *current* probability of reproducing is greater.

Since these qualities cannot be observed directly, men would be expected to be sensitive to cues that might be indicative of a woman’s fertility and reproductive value. One might expect that men would prefer younger women as short-term and long-term mates. Again, since age is not something that can be observed directly, men should be sensitive to physical cues that are reliably linked with age. For example, with increasing age, skin tends to wrinkle, hair turns gray and falls out, lips become thinner, ears become larger, facial features become less regular and muscles lose their tone. Men could solve the problem of identifying reproductively valuable women if they attended to physical features linked with age and health, *and* if their standards of attractiveness evolved to correspond to these features.

As an aside, it is worth noting that cultures do differ in their standards of physical beauty, but less so than anthropologists initially assumed. Cultural differences of physical beauty tend to center on whether relative plumpness or thinness is valued. In cultures where food is relatively scarce, plumpness is valued, whereas cultures with greater abundance value thinness. With the exception of plumpness and thinness, however, the physical cues to youth and health are seen as sexually attractive in all known cultures that have been studied. In no culture do people perceive wrinkled skin, open sores and lesions, thin lips, jaundiced eyes, poor muscle tone and irregular facial features to be attractive.

A woman’s reproductive success, however, is not similarly dependent on solving the problem of fertility in mates. Because a man’s reproductive capacity is less closely linked with age and cannot be assessed as accurately from appearance, youth and physical attractiveness in a mate should be less important to women than it is to men.

Among our sample of American college students we asked men and women to evaluate the relative significance (on a scale from 0, unimportant, to 3, important) of the characteristics *good looking* and *physically attractive* in a short-term and a long-term mate. We found that



Figure 8. King Hussein' Ibn Talal' (born in 1935) of Jordan and his wife, Queen Noor (formerly Lisa Halaby of Washington, DC, who was born in 1951), provide an example of the general tendency for men to mate with women who are significantly younger than themselves. Sexual-strategies theory holds that men are attracted to younger women as long-term mates because they have a higher reproductive value than older women. The King and Queen are pictured with some of their children.

*Hypothesis 5:
Men seeking a
long-term mate
will solve the
problem of
identifying
reproductively
valuable women.*

men's preference for physical attractiveness in short-term mates approached the upper limit of the rating scale (about 2.71). Interestingly, this preference was stronger in men seeking short-term mates than in men seeking long-term mates (about 2.31). The results are a little surprising to us because we did not predict that men would place a greater significance on the physical attractiveness of a short-term mate compared to a long-term mate.

Women also favored physical attractiveness in a short-term mate (2.43) and a long-term mate (2.10). Here again, physical attractiveness was more important in short-term mating than in long-term mating. In both contexts, however, physical attractiveness was significantly less important to women than it is to men.

We also tested these predictions in our international survey of 37 cultures. My colleagues in each country asked men and women to evaluate the relative importance of the characteristics *good looking* and *physically attractive* in a mate. As in our American college population, men throughout the world placed a high value on physical attractiveness in a partner.

In each of the 37 cultures men valued physical attractiveness and good looks in a mate

more than did their female counterparts. These sex differences are not limited to cultures that are saturated with visual media, Westernized cultures or racial, ethnic, religious or political groups. Worldwide, men place a premium on physical appearance.

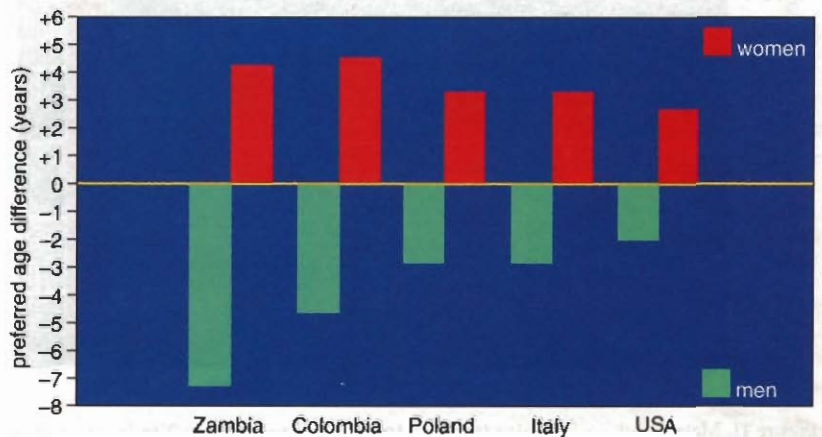


Figure 9. Preferences for an age difference between oneself and one's spouse differ for men and women. Men in each of the 37 cultures examined by the author prefer to mate with younger women, whereas women generally prefer to mate with older men. Here the disparities between the mating preferences of men and women in five countries show some of the cultural variation across the sample.

Hypothesis 6:
Men seeking a long-term mate will solve the problem of paternity confidence.



Courtesy of The Museum of Modern Art Film Stills Archive

Figure 10. Othello's jealous rage and murder of Desdemona in Shakespeare's tragic play was incited by her presumed sexual infidelity. According to sexual-strategies theory, men have strong emotional responses to a mate's sexual infidelity because the ancestors of modern males who protected themselves against cuckoldry had greater reproductive success. Here the German actor Emil Jannings plays the role of Othello in a movie from the early part of this century.

A further clue to the significance of reproductive value comes in an international study of divorce. Laura Betzig of the University of Michigan studied the causes of marital dissolution in 89 cultures from around the world. She found that one of the strongest sex-linked causes of divorce was a woman's old age (hence low reproductive value) and the inability to produce children. A woman's old age was significantly more likely to result in divorce than a man's old age.

Hypothesis 6: Men seeking a long-term mate will solve the problem of paternity confidence. Men face an adaptive problem that is not faced by women—the problem of certainty in parenthood. A woman can always be certain that a child is hers, but a man cannot be so sure that his mate's child is his own. Historically, men have sequestered women in various ways through the use of chastity belts, eunuch-guarded harems, surgical procedures and veiling to reduce their sexual attractiveness to other men. Some of these practices continue to this day and have been observed by social scientists in many parts of the world.

Most of these studies have considered three possibilities: (1) the desire for chastity in a mate (cues to *prior* lack of sexual contact with others), (2) the desire for fidelity in mates (cues to no *future* sexual contact with others), and (3) the jealous guarding of mates to prevent sexual contact with other men. We have looked at these issues ourselves in various studies.

In our international study, we examined men's and women's desire for chastity in a potential marriage partner. It proved to be a highly variable trait across cultures. For example, Chinese men and women both feel that it is indispensable in a mate. In the Netherlands and Scandinavia, on the other hand, both sexes see chastity as irrelevant in a mate. Overall, however, in about two-thirds of the international samples, men desire chastity more than women do. Sex differences are especially large among Indonesians, Iranians and Palestinian Arabs. In the remaining one-third of the cultures, no sex differences were found. In no cultures do women desire virginity in a mate more than men. In other words, where there is a difference between the sexes, it is always the case that men place a greater value on chastity.

Although we have yet to examine the desire for mate fidelity in our international sample, in her cross-cultural study Betzig found that the most prevalent cause of divorce was sexual infidelity, a cause that was highly sex-linked. A wife's infidelity was considerably more likely to result in a divorce than a husband's infidelity. Compromising a man's certainty in paternity is apparently seen worldwide as a breach so great that it often causes the irrevocable termination of the long-term marital bond.

We have examined the issue of fidelity among American college students. Indeed,

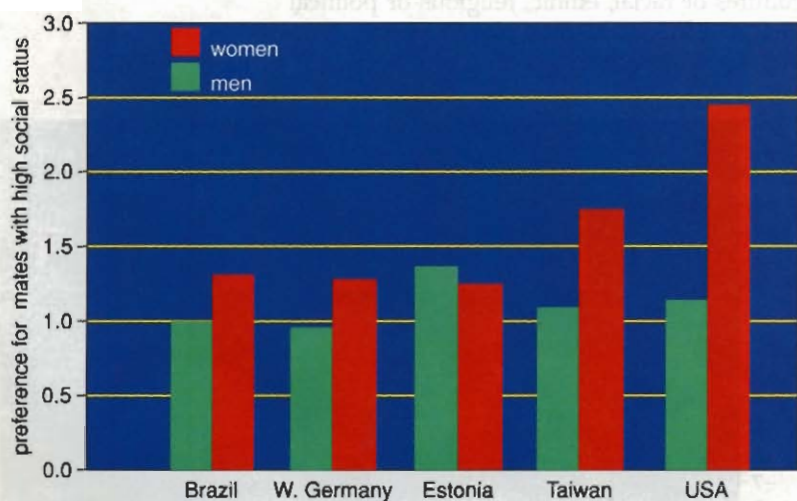


Figure 11. Mate's high social status (ranging from 3, *indispensable*, to 0, *unimportant*) is typically greater for women than for men. Of the 37 cultures examined, only males in Estonia valued the social status of their spouses more than did their female counterparts. (Only a sample of five countries is shown here.) Women generally prefer men with a high social standing because a man's ability to provide resources for her offspring is related to his social status.



PhotoFest

Figure 12. Female preference for short-term mates who are willing to provide resources was examined in the 1993 film *Indecent Proposal*. Robert Redford played the role of a wealthy older man who offered one million dollars to a younger married woman, played by Demi Moore, in exchange for a short-term mating. Since multiple short-term matings do not directly increase a woman's reproductive success, sexual-strategies theory holds that a woman can increase her reproductive success by acquiring resources.

Schmitt and I found that fidelity is the characteristic most valued by men in a long-term mate. It is also highly valued by women, but it ranks only third or fourth in importance, behind such qualities as honesty. It seems that American men are concerned more about the future fidelity of a mate than with her prior abstinence.

Our studies of jealousy reveal an interesting qualitative distinction between men and women. Randy Larsen, Jennifer Semmelroth, Drew Westen and I conducted a series of interviews in which we asked American college students to imagine two scenarios: (1) their partner having sexual intercourse with someone else, or (2) their partner falling in love and forming a deep emotional attachment to someone else. The majority of the men reported that they would be more upset if their mate had sexual intercourse with another man. In contrast, the majority of the women reported that they would be more upset if their mate formed an emotional attachment to another woman.

We also posed the same two scenarios to another group of 60 men and women, but this time we recorded their physiological responses. We placed electrodes on the corrugator muscle in the brow (which contracts during frowning), on two fingers of the right hand to measure skin conductance (or sweating), and the thumb to measure heart rate.

The results provided a striking confirmation of the verbal responses of our earlier study. Men

became more physiologically distressed at the thought of their mate's sexual infidelity than their mate's emotional infidelity. In response to the thought of sexual infidelity, their skin conductances increased by an average of about 1.5 microSiemens, the frowning muscle showed 7.75 microvolt units of contraction and their hearts increased by about five beats per minute. In response to the thought of emotional infidelity

*Hypothesis 7:
Women seeking a short-term mate will prefer men willing to impart immediate resources.*

*Hypothesis 8:
Women will be more selective than men in choosing a short-term mate.*

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Figure 13. Personal advertisements in newspapers for people seeking short-term mates support the hypothesis that women are generally more selective than men. Women tend to define specific qualities they seek in a man, whereas men tend to define their own qualities—attractiveness, high social status, ambition, and professional standing—that they believe will attract women.

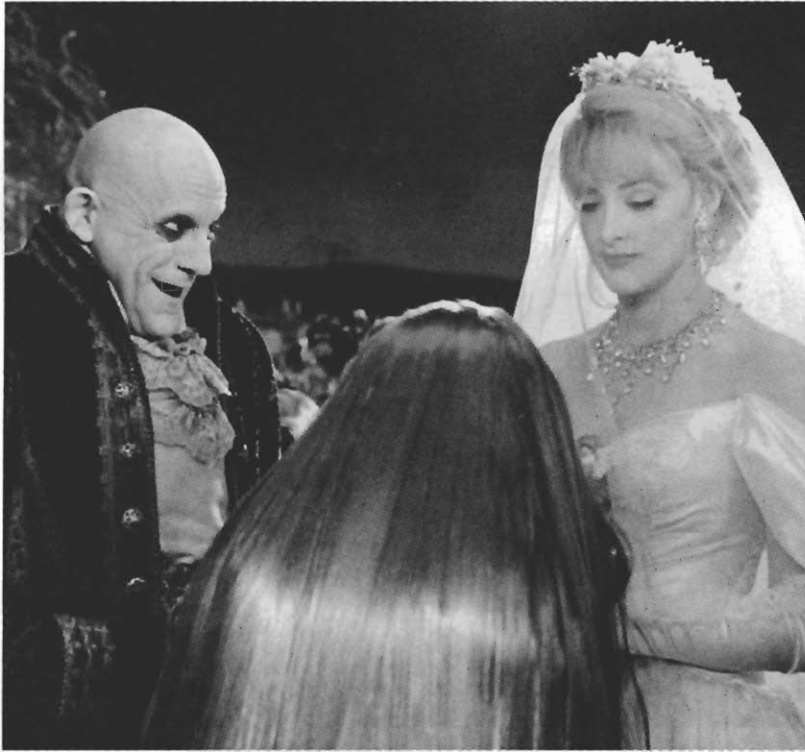


Figure 14. Female preferences for long-term mates who are willing to provide resources is parodied in the 1993 film *Addams Family Values*. Joan Cusack (right) plays the cultural stereotype of the beautiful “gold-digging” woman, and Christopher Lloyd (left) plays the wealthy but unattractive man, Uncle Fester. The character Cousin Itt (hair in the center) performs the wedding ceremony.

Hypothesis 9:
Women seeking a long-term mate will prefer men who can provide resources for their offspring.

ty, the men’s skin conductance showed little change from baseline, their frowning increased by only 1.16 units, and their heart rates did not increase. Women, on the other hand, tended to show the opposite pattern. For example, in response to the thought of emotional infidelity, their frowning increased by 8.12 units, whereas the thought of sexual infidelity elicited a response of only 3.03 units.

Hypothesis 7: *Women seeking a short-term mate will prefer men willing to impart immediate resources.* Women confront a different set of mating problems than those faced by men. They need not consider the problem of partner number, since mating with 100 men in one year would produce no more offspring than mating with just one. Nor do they have to be concerned about the certainty of genetic parenthood. Women also do not need to identify men with the highest fertility since men in their 50s, 60s and 70s can and do sire children.

In species where males invest parentally in offspring, where resources can be accrued and defended, and where males vary in their ability and willingness to channel these resources, females gain a selective advantage by choosing mates who are willing and able to invest resources. Females so choosing afford their offspring better protection, more food and other material advantages that increase their ability to survive and reproduce. Do human females

exhibit this behavior pattern? If so, we should be able to make a few predictions.

In short-term contexts, women especially value signs that a man will immediately expend resources on them. We asked 50 female subjects to evaluate the desirability of a few characteristics in a short-term and a long-term mate: *spends a lot of money early on, gives gifts early on, and has an extravagant lifestyle*. We found that women place greater importance on these qualities in a short-term mate than in a long-term mate, despite the fact that women are generally less exacting in short-term mating contexts.

We would also predict that women will find undesirable any traits that suggest that a man is reluctant to expend resources on her immediately. When we tested this prediction with the same sample population, we found that women especially dislike men who are stingy early on. Although this attribute is undesirable in a long-term mate as well, it is significantly more so in a short-term mate.

Hypothesis 8: *Women will be more selective than men in choosing a short-term mate.* This hypothesis follows from the fact that women (more than men) use short-term matings to evaluate prospective long-term mates. We can make several predictions based on this hypothesis.

First, women (more than men) will dislike short-term mates who are already in a relationship. We examined the relative undesirability of a prospective mate who was already in a relationship to 42 men and 44 women, using a scale from -3 (extremely undesirable) to 3 (extremely desirable). Although men were only slightly bothered (averaging a score of about -1.04) by this scenario, women were significantly more reluctant to engage in a relationship with such a mate (average score about -1.70).

We would also predict that women (more than men) will dislike short-term mates who are promiscuous. To a woman, promiscuity indicates that a man is seeking short-term relationships and is less likely to commit to a long-term mating. We tested this prediction in the same sample of 42 men and 44 women using the same rating scale as before. Although men found promiscuity to be of neutral value in a short-term mate, women rated the trait as moderately undesirable (an average of about -2.00).

Finally, because one of the hypothesized functions for female short-term mating is protection from aggressive men, women should value attributes such as physical size and strength in short-term mates more than in long-term mates. When we asked men and women to evaluate the notion of a mate being *physically strong*, we found that women preferred physically strong mates in all contexts more than men did, and that women placed a premium on physical strength in a short-term mate. This was

true despite the higher standards women generally hold for a long-term mate.

Hypothesis 9: Women seeking a long-term mate will prefer men who can provide resources for her offspring. In a long-term mating context, we would predict that women (more than men) will desire traits such as a potential mate's ambition, earning capacity, professional degrees and wealth.

In one study we asked a group of 58 men and 50 women to rate the desirability (to the average man and woman) of certain characteristics that are indicators of future resource-acquisition potential. These included such qualities as *is likely to succeed in profession, is likely to earn a lot of money, and has a reliable future career*. We found that in each case women desired the attribute more in a long-term mate than in a short-term mate. Moreover, women valued each of these characteristics in a long-term mate more than men did.

In our international study, we also examined men's and women's preferences for long-term mates who can acquire resources. In this case we looked at such attributes as *good financial prospects, social status and ambition-industriousness*—attributes that typically lead to the acquisition of resources. We found that sex differences in the attitudes of men and women were strikingly consistent around the world. In 36 of the 37 cultures, women placed significantly greater value on financial prospects than did men. Although the sex differences were less profound for the other two qualities, in the overwhelming majority of cultures, women desire *social status and ambition-industriousness* in a long-term mate more than their male counterparts do.

Finally, in her international study of divorce, Betzig found that a man's failure to provide proper economic support for his wife and children was a significant sex-linked cause of divorce.

Conclusion

The results of our work and that of others provide strong evidence that the traditional assumptions about mate preferences—that they are arbitrary and culture-bound—are simply wrong. Darwin's initial insights into sexual selection have turned out to be scientifically profound for people, even though he understood neither their functional-adaptive nature nor the importance of relative parental investment for driving the two components of sexual selection.

Men and women have evolved powerful desires for particular characteristics in a mate. These desires are not arbitrary, but are highly patterned and universal. The patterns correspond closely to the specific adaptive problems that men and women have faced during the course of human evolutionary history. These are the problems of paternity certainty, partner number and reproductive capacity for men, and the problems of willingness and ability to invest resources for women.

It turns out that a woman's physical appear-

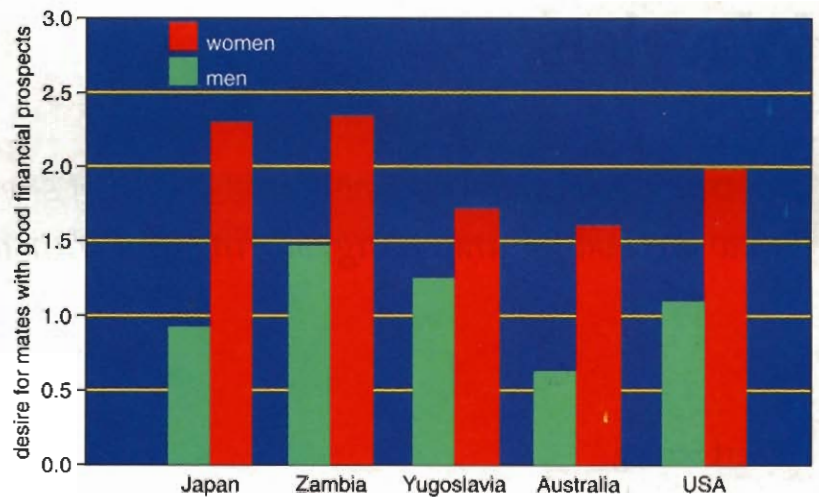


Figure 15. Mate's good financial prospects are consistently more important (measured on a scale from 3, *indispensable*, to 0, *unimportant*) for women than for men throughout the world. In the author's cross-cultural study of 37 countries, women valued the financial prospects of a potential spouse more than their male counterparts did in every culture but one (Spain). A sample of five countries is shown here.

ance is the most powerful predictor of the occupational status of the man she marries. A woman's appearance is more significant than her intelligence, her level of education or even her original socioeconomic status in determining the mate she will marry. Women who possess the qualities men prefer are most able to translate their preferences into actual mating decisions. Similarly, men possessing what women want—the ability to provide resources—are best able to mate according to their preferences.

Some adaptive problems are faced by men and women equally: identifying mates who show a proclivity to cooperate and mates who show evidence of having good parenting skills. Men do not look at women simply as sex objects, nor do women look at men simply as success objects. One of our most robust observations was that both sexes place tremendous importance on mutual love and kindness when seeking a long-term mate.

The similarities among cultures and between sexes implies a degree of psychological unity or species typicality that transcends geographical, racial, political, ethnic and sexual diversity. Future research could fruitfully examine the ecological and historical sources of diversity, while searching for the adaptive functions of the sexual desires that are shared by all members of our species.

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