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## Mate Selection

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# Mate Selection

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“It is a truth universally acknowledged that a single man in possession of a good fortune must be in want of a wife”—so wrote Jane Austen in *Pride and Prejudice*. From classic literature to contemporary screenplays, from the latest celebrity news to office gossip, it is nearly impossible to escape the pervasive topic of romantic relationships. Indeed, the pursuit of mates consumes a significant portion of our time and energy, and for good reason—mates give us companionship, pleasure, comfort, security, and even health benefits. As we discuss in this article, there are two major theoretical perspectives for understanding mate selection. Although these perspectives have different explanations for people's mate choices, both agree that who one selects as a mate depends largely on the type of relationship one seeks and the characteristics one desires.

## Theoretical Perspectives

The sociocultural perspective (Eagly & Wood, 1999) focuses on the role of culture and social norms in the development of men's and women's social behavior. Thus, mate selection is typically explained in terms of modern-day societal factors. In contrast, evolutionary theories of human behavior are based on conditions and adaptive problems faced by ancestral humans. From an evolutionary perspective, mate selection is viewed as a process facilitated by multiple psychological adaptations designed to ensure the selection of a mate who will help produce viable offspring (Buss & Schmitt, 1993). Therefore, mate preferences today might reflect heritable psychological mechanisms that have allowed ancestral humans to successfully reproduce over thousands of generations.

## Relationship Preferences

People want to be in relationships for various reasons—love, sex, family—and the type of relationship one seeks significantly influences one's mate choices. Long-term relationships, such as marriage, entail significant investment and commitment by both partners, whereas short-term relationships, like one-night stands, tend to be primarily sexual. In general, most women favor long-term relationships, whereas men report a stronger desire for casual sex. To some extent, this may be due to the perpetuation of gender stereotypes. It can also be explained in evolutionary terms. That is, in the ancestral environment, the cost of short-term relationships was higher for a woman,

because she could have become pregnant and faced rearing an infant without paternal support. Thus, natural selection may have favored women who desired commitment before sex, thereby ensuring paternal support and increasing their offspring's chances of survival.

### **Trait Preferences**

Mate selection is further based on preferences for certain traits. In general, those who pursue long-term relationships value traits such as kindness, emotional stability, and intelligence, while those who pursue short-term relationships tend to focus on physical attractiveness. Even so, men and women still differ in their trait preferences. For example, numerous studies have shown that, when considering long-term mates, women prefer older men who are high in social status, ambitious, athletic, and dependable, whereas men prefer younger women who are physically attractive. These sex differences in preferences may reflect societal factors, such as women's limited access to status and power, or the media's emphasis on female physical attractiveness. On the other hand, several studies have found the same differences across cultures, suggesting that these differences may be rooted in human nature.

From an evolutionary perspective, sex-specific trait preferences stem from the adaptive problems faced by ancestral men and women. For instance, a major adaptive problem for ancestral women was acquiring adequate resources and protection for their offspring. One solution was to find a long-term mate with ample resources and willingness to support and raise children. This may account for women's reported preferences for social status, employment, education, and physical strength. Another problem was making certain one had healthy offspring who could survive harsh ancestral conditions, even in the absence of paternal support. Therefore, women, especially those pursuing short-term relationships, may have evolved to be attracted to cues of genetic quality. Indeed, research has shown that women are attracted to testosterone-driven features, such as masculinity and symmetry (Thornhill & Gangestad, 1994). Masculinity and symmetry are hypothesized to be an indication of "good genes" in that men who developed masculine features and a symmetrical physique were able to ward off parasites despite the immune-suppressing effects of higher baseline testosterone.

Men faced very different adaptive problems. For example, although a man has the ability to have many offspring with multiple mates, his mating effort would not have led to reproduction if he consistently selected infertile women. Therefore, men have likely evolved to prioritize the identification of traits that indicate a capacity for bearing children (Li, Bailey, Kenrick, & Linsenmeier, 2002). Age is one important factor, as women reach peak fertility in their early 20s. It should come as no surprise then that men tend to prefer women in that age range (Kenrick & Keefe, 1992). Waist-to-hip ratio (WHR) is another characteristic closely linked to fertility. WHR describes body-fat distribution; the lower a woman's WHR, the more fertile she is, and the more attractive men find her to be (Singh, 1993). This appears to be true regardless of body mass.

In summary, mate selection can be viewed from different perspectives, and much research on mate choice has concentrated on relationship and trait preferences. Still, mate selection is a complex process, and there are numerous variables yet to be investigated. For instance, there has been a growing interest in the menstrual cycle in women, which is characterized by fluctuations in baseline

levels of female sex hormones (estrogen and progesterone), as well as the male sex hormone testosterone. These fluctuations coincide with specific changes in mating behavior. Evidence suggests that when women in long-term relationships are ovulating, and therefore most likely to conceive, they show increased attraction to masculine, symmetrical men other than their primary partners. That is, women with a proclivity for long-term relationships during other times in their cycle show a “switch” to a short-term strategy during ovulation. Encouraged by findings such as these, mate selection researchers will likely continue to uncover the psychological and biological underpinnings of human mating dynamics.

See also: Interpersonal Relationships; Love; Sexual Desire

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