

## Chapter 10: Sex Differences in Mate Preferences

When men look for a mate, what characteristics are most important for them? When women evaluate a potential mate, what characteristics are most important for them? Do men and women value the same characteristics? Or are there sex differences in mate preferences?

The chapters from the book "Why is Sex Fun" provided great discussions about what is meant by "parental investment". In fact the better term is "differential parental investment" because we know that men and women don't have the same level of investment in the child rearing process. Women have a greater investment than men. This difference in investment has led most male mammals to not give parental care. A lack of a difference (as in externally fertilization) gives way to male fishes providing care.

Evolution tells us that animals are motivated (through evolved instincts) to possess traits and behaviors that maximize their number of offspring. Preferences in a potential mate are also evolved in that same regard. And differences in investment predicts differences in what males and female want most in a mate.

How can human males maximize their offspring? Well we would predict they wouldn't be too choosy. They make so much sperm that if they waste some, it is no big deal. Instead of being choosy, a better strategy would be try to have sex with as many women as possible. Not so for women. They don't have more offspring by having sex with as many men as possible. Once they become pregnant, they are "shut down" for 9 months, meaning they can't conceive again during that time. And we learned about "lactational amenorrhea" where women aren't fertile while doing traditional breast feeding (on demand, whenever the infant desires it). So what strategy is best for a woman? The answer is to be choosy. Choosy for what? She will have more kids if she chooses a man with resources to help her raise the offspring. He should also be generous and willing to share those resources with her. Looks are less important in generating numbers of kids. Traits that predict power and resources should also be valued, like intelligence and high drive.

For men, they will have more kids if they have sex with fertile women. (we already mentioned they should be more agreeable to casual sex). But women don't wear signs saying "I'm fertile". Ah...but there are cues to female fertility. Fertility is higher in younger women and women with clear skin, bigger breasts, a certain waist-hip ratio, and other assorted cues. So we would predict that men would value youth and beauty. We should also predict that men would be the ones to display sexual jealousy and do "mate guarding" behaviors (like chastity belts). In fact one study asked men and women to decide which would be worst: imagining you mate having sex with another or imagining your mate becoming emotionally involved with another. Results indicated that women were most upset thinking of their mate becoming emotionally involved. That would predict loss of resources. Men were more upset thinking of their partner having sex with another. That would predict the possibility of raising children that don't have your genes. We can see then, that men should value younger women and women should prefer old men because it takes some time to acquire resources. Research has supported all these predictions.

David Buss (1989) went to 37 cultures to measure these mate preferences in order to see if there were differences across cultures. He found that in all 37, men valued youth and beauty more than women did, and women valued resources more than men did.

## **Importance of Physical Appearance**

Because of the many cues conveyed by a woman's physical appearance, and because male standards of beauty have evolved to correspond to these cues, men place a premium on physical appearance and attractiveness in their mate preferences. Within the United States, mate preferences for physical attractiveness, physical appearance, good looks, or beauty have been lavishly documented. When five thousand college students were asked in the 1950s to identify the characteristics they wanted in a future husband or wife, what men listed far more often than women was physical attractiveness. The sheer number of terms that men listed betrays their values. They wanted a wife who was pretty, attractive, beautiful, gorgeous, comely, lovely, ravishing, and glamorous. American college women, at that time at least, rarely listed physical appearance as paramount in their ideal husband.

A cross-generational mating study, spanning a fifty-year period within the United States from 1939 to 1989, gauged the value men and women place on different characteristics in a mate. The same eighteen characteristics were measured at roughly one-decade intervals to determine how mating preferences have changed over time within the United States. In all cases, men rate physical attractiveness and good looks as more important and desirable in a potential mate than do women. Men tend to see attractiveness as important, whereas women tend to see it as desirable but not very important. The sex difference in the importance of attractiveness remains constant from one generation to the next. Its size does not vary throughout the entire fifty years. Men's greater preference for physically attractive mates is among the most consistently documented psychological sex differences.

This does not mean that the importance people place on attractiveness is forever fixed by our genes. On the contrary, the importance of attractiveness has increased dramatically within the United States in this century alone. For nearly every decade since 1930, physical appearance has gone up in importance for men and women about equally, corresponding with the rise in television, fashion magazines, advertising, and other media depictions of attractive models. For example, the importance attached to good looks in a marriage partner on a scale of 0.00 to 3.00 increased between 1939 and 1989 from 1.50 to 2.11 for men and from 0.94 to 1.67 for women. These shifts show that mate preferences can change. But the sex difference so far remains invariant. The gap between men and women has been constant since the late 1930s.

These sex differences are not limited to the United States, or even to Western cultures. Regardless of the location, habitat, marriage system, or cultural living arrangement, men in all thirty-seven cultures included in the international study on choosing a mate value physical appearance in a potential mate more than women

From Buss "men want something else".