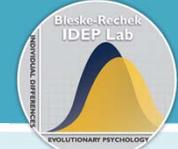




Romantic Relationship Attitudes and Partner Preferences: A Longitudinal Test of Change During Emerging Adulthood

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BACKGROUND

Change over time
Emerging adulthood is viewed by developmental psychologists as a critical period of romantic exploration and growth that helps individuals form their relationship identities (Arnett, 2004).

Due to a general lack of longitudinal studies on the subject, relationship scientists currently know little about this period of growth and whether individuals' mating orientations and preferences are actually changing over time.

Despite this lack of knowledge, college students have consistent shared assumptions about how their peers' mating preferences mature over the course of their college years. According to one study, college students expect their emerging adult peers to become less oriented toward opportunistic sex and physical appearance as they progress through college (Bleske-Rechek et al., 2009).

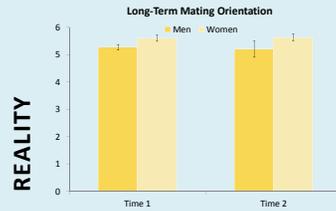
Sex variation
Little is known about change over time, but extensive research has documented systematic similarities and differences in men's and women's mate preferences and mating orientations (attitudes toward long-term partnerships and short-term sexual relationships) (Buss, 1989).

In this study we looked to replicate the many previous findings regarding between-sex similarities and differences. We also looked to use a longitudinal research method to test assumptions about change over time.

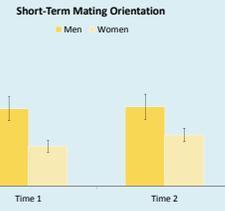
RELATIONSHIP ATTITUDES: LONG-TERM AND SHORT-TERM MATING ORIENTATIONS AND EXPERIENCES

EXPECTATIONS

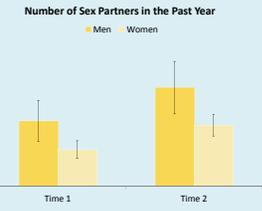
- As students mature, they become more interested in meaningful, long-term relationships
- Over time, students become less invested in short-term, sex-only relationships and flings



There was no change over time in attitudes toward long-term mating. Long-term mating orientation was high for both sexes at both time points, (Time 1: $M = 5.51, SD = .72$; Time 2: $M = 5.50, SD = .89$). Women scored significantly higher than men did on long-term mating orientation at both time points (Time 1: $t(194.14) = -2.86, p < .01, d = -0.59$; Time 2: $t(176.79) = -2.66, p = .01, d = -0.61$).



Contrary to the belief that short-term mating effort decreases, men's short-term mating orientation did not change over time ($t(156) = -0.36, p = .72, d = -0.05$) and women's actually increased ($t(142) = -3.63, p < .001, d = -0.30$). At both time points, men held more favorable attitudes toward short-term mating than women did (Time 1: $t(184.35) = 5.63, p < .001, d = 1.23$; Time 2: $t(198) = 4.23, p < .001, d = 0.60$).



Students' self-reported rates of recent sexual activity aligned with this steady (if not increasing) interest in short-term mating. When asked how many sex partners they had had within their past year, participants reported more sex partners at Time 2 compared to Time 1, ($t(197) = -5.02, p < .001, d = -0.36$). This pattern replicated within each sex (men: $t(55) = -2.55, p = .014, d = -0.34$; women: $t(141) = -4.48, p < .001, d = -0.38$).

MATE PREFERENCES: AGE AND SEX VARIATION IN HOW STUDENTS SPEND THEIR "MATE DOLLARS"

EXPECTATIONS

- Importance of physical attractiveness in a mate would decrease as students matured
- Attributes tied to personality and relationship compatibility would increase in value over time

REALITY

The college students in our sample did not show consistent changes over time in mate attribute preferences.

Men did not allot fewer mate dollars toward physical attractiveness at Time 2 compared to Time 1 ($p = .11$), although there was a weak decrease in allocation toward physical attractiveness among women ($p = .01, d = 0.22$).

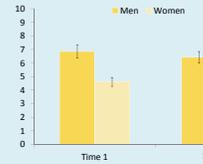
Allocation toward attributes tied to personality and relationship compatibility – such as a mate's faithfulness, intelligence, and similar values – did not change over time. However, an increase in emotional stability was detected when the dollar allotments of both sexes were combined ($p = .03$).

DIFFERENCES AND SIMILARITIES BETWEEN MEN AND WOMEN

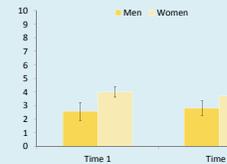
Men allocated more "mate dollars" toward physical attractiveness and intelligence than women did. In fact, the sex differences in allotments for physical attractiveness were much larger than any other effects of time or sex observed in this sample ($d_s > 1.15$).

Women allocated more "mate dollars" toward ambition and potential for financial success than men did. At Time 2, women's allotments also reflected a higher interest in desire for children than men's allotments did.

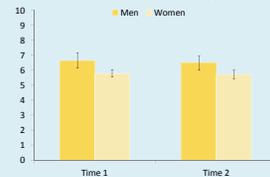
Mate Dollars Allotted to Physical Attractiveness



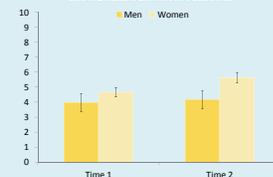
Mate Dollars Allotted to Potential for Financial Success



Mate Dollars Allotted to Intelligence



Mate Dollars Allotted to Ambition



METHOD

Overview

In 2009, we collected responses from a representative sample of undergraduate students (263 women, 110 men; mean age = 18.78); the majority were freshmen. In 2012, we obtained follow-up responses from 200 of the 244 original participants who were still enrolled at the university (141 women, 59 men; mean age = 21.46).

Mating Attitudes and Experiences

Participants completed Jackson and Kirkpatrick's (2007) measure of short-term and long-term mating orientation. They were also asked to report sexual activity, including number of long-term relationship partners ever (4 months or more), number of one-time sex partners ever, and number of sex partners in the previous year.

Mate Preferences

Participants completed a task in which they were allotted 50 "mate dollars" toward conceptualizing the ideal romantic partner. They distributed their limited mate dollar budget across the following characteristics: ambition, desire for children, emotional stability, faithfulness, intelligence, physical attractiveness, potential for financial success, sense of humor, similar values, and social popularity. They were not allowed more than 10 dollars per attribute, and their total dollars spent had to add to 50. Similar budgeting exercises have been used by other researchers (Li & Kenrick, 2006).

Dollars allotted to: (0-10 dollars possible)	Comparing sexes at Time 1		Comparing sexes at Time 2		Comparing sexes (across time)		Comparing time points (across sex)	
	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women	Time 1	Time 2
Ambition	3.97 (2.24)	4.66 (1.89)*	4.16 (2.19)	5.63 (2.06)**	4.07 (1.76)	5.14 (1.65)**	4.46 (2.01)	5.21 (2.19)**
Desire for children	4.06 (2.54)	4.72 (2.51)	3.31 (2.59)	4.4 (2.33)**	3.68 (2.29)	4.56 (2.09)*	4.53 (2.53)*	4.09 (2.45)
Emotional stability	5.07 (2.41)	4.86 (1.92)	5.78 (1.97)	5.16 (2.1)	5.43 (1.64)	5.01 (1.53)	4.92 (2.07)	5.34 (2.08)*
Faithfulness	8.29 (2.05)	8.05 (2.06)	7.89 (2.08)	7.95 (1.92)	8.09 (1.77)	8.00 (1.59)	8.12 (2.06)	7.94 (1.96)
Intelligence	6.65 (1.9)**	5.79 (1.45)	6.47 (1.73)**	5.72 (1.65)	6.56 (1.47)**	5.76 (1.14)	6.04 (1.63)	5.93 (1.7)
Physical attractiveness	6.84 (1.81)**	4.6 (1.96)	6.41 (1.59)**	4.13 (1.82)	6.63 (1.41)**	4.37 (1.57)	5.23 (2.17)**	4.78 (2.03)
Potential for financial success	2.55 (2.38)	3.99 (2.2)**	2.8 (1.96)	3.7 (2.03)*	2.68 (1.81)	3.85 (1.59)**	3.59 (2.34)	3.45 (2.05)
Sense of humor	5.67 (2.46)	5.66 (2.21)	5.83 (2.39)	5.58 (2.02)	5.75 (1.99)	5.62 (1.81)	5.66 (2.28)	5.65 (2.12)
Similar values	5.33 (2.81)	6.03 (2.44)	5.96 (2.32)	5.91 (2.27)	5.64 (2.09)	5.97 (1.98)	5.83 (2.56)	5.93 (2.28)
Social popularity	1.65 (1.8)	1.62 (1.52)	1.54 (1.59)	1.75 (1.48)	1.59 (1.32)	1.68 (1.24)	1.63 (1.6)	1.69 (1.51)

Values in parentheses represent standard deviations. * $p < .01$, ** $p < .001$

DISCUSSION

Sex variation

Our data show many examples of systematic sex similarities and differences that coincide with previous research.

Overall, both sexes report a stronger orientation toward long-term mating than toward short-term mating. Women were significantly higher in long-term mating orientation than men were, and attitudes toward short-term sexual relationships were more favorable among men than among women.

Allocation in the mate dollar budgeting exercise also aligned with previous research: Men placed greater emphasis on physical attractiveness than women did and women placed greater emphasis on ambition and potential for financial success than men did.

Change across time

College students believe that relationship orientations and mate preferences of emerging adults are maturing as they age (Bleske-Rechek, et al., 2009), but our study did not reveal that maturation, at least over the three-year span we pursued.

College students predicted that interest in meaningful, lasting relationships would increase as students proceeded through college, but in our sample attitudes toward long-term mating did not change with time. In fact, long-term mating attitudes were at near-ceiling levels at both time points.

Some students also predicted that interest in flings and sex-only relationships would decrease as students matured. However, men remained constant in their attitudes toward short-term mating and women's attitudes actually increased. In addition, individuals reported having had sex with more

partners during their fourth year than they had reported having during their first year.

Another prevalent assumption was that students place more emphasis on a partner's personality as they head toward graduation and less emphasis on a partner's physical attractiveness. Although physical attractiveness decreased in value for women, men valued it highly at both time points.

Limitations

This study uses data from self-reported preferences rather than recording actual mating decisions. However, our sample's reported mate preferences align with actual mate selections recorded in speed dating research (Todd, et al., 2007). Our data reinforce the importance of checking people's assumptions about their own and others' behavior against actual observations and systematic data on behavior.

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