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Continuity and change in emerging adults' mate preferences and mating orientations

April Bleske-Rechek *, Danielle E. Ryan

University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire, USA

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ABSTRACT

The various milestones and transitions of emerging adulthood have led previous researchers to investigate continuity and change in personality traits during this life period. In the current study, we build on that research by investigating continuity and change during emerging adulthood in mate preferences and mating orientations. Following past research, we hypothesized that mate preferences and mating orientations would demonstrate weak-to-moderate rank-order stability over 3 years of emerging adulthood. We also hypothesized that emerging adults would display mean-level changes that reflect increasing maturity, such as an increased emphasis on long-term committed relationships and partners' internal attributes and a decreased emphasis on short-term sexual relationships and partners' physical attractiveness. We followed 200 young adults from their first year to their fourth year in college. Analyses revealed weak-to-moderate rank-order stability but very little mean-level change in mate preferences and mating orientations. We discuss limitations of this study and directions for future research.

1. Introduction

In industrialized societies, the ages of 18–24 have been labeled "emerging adulthood" – a period of changes and identity exploration (Arnett, 2000). Many individuals leave home for the first time, begin college, and start working full-time. They also explore different relationship partners and types of relationships, which are thought to help form their relationship identities (Fincham & Cui, 2011) and prepare them for serious commitments of adulthood (Meier & Allen, 2009). Because the various challenges of emerging adulthood implicate it as an important period for personality development, previous researchers have investigated the ways in which personality traits display continuity and change during emerging adulthood (Roberts, Caspi, & Moffitt, 2001; Robins, Fraley, Roberts, & Trzesniewski, 2001; Vaidya, Gray, Haig, & Watson, 2002). Similarly, varied relationship partners and experiences have the potential to influence individuals' preferences and attitudes toward romantic relationships. Thus, in the current study we investigate the ways in which romantic partner preferences and relationship attitudes display continuity and change during emerging adulthood.

1.1. Previous research on continuity and change in emerging adulthood

During emerging adulthood, men and women move from being largely dependent on their parents to becoming increasingly independent and committed to their future adult roles in terms of career and family. How stable is personality during this transition period? Previous researchers have operationalized stability in several ways, the two most common being *rank-order* stability and *mean-level* stability. Rank-order stability reflects the degree to which the relative ordering of individuals on a trait is maintained over time. Previous research suggests that the rank-order stability of personality during emerging adulthood, particularly among college students, is moderate-to-strong, with cross-time coefficients over 2–4 years averaging .5–.7 (Robins et al., 2001; Vaidya et al., 2002). This degree of stability supports the proposition that personality traits function as organizational constructs, influencing the situations individuals enter into and how they behave in response to new challenges. The magnitude of stability in personality during emerging adulthood, however, is slightly lower than in subsequent years of adulthood (Roberts & DelVecchio, 2000), perhaps because of identity and relationship exploration during this time (Hopwood et al., 2011).

Mean-level stability refers to the degree to which the average score of a population changes over time. Previous research suggests that emerging adults display small but systematic changes

* Corresponding author. Address: University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire, Psychology Department, 105 Garfield Avenue, Eau Claire, WI 54702, USA. Tel.: +1 715 836 4641; fax: +1 715 836 2214.
E-mail address: bleskeal@uwec.edu (A. Bleske-Rechek).

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over time: On average, they tend to become more agreeable, controlled, and conscientious, and less neurotic and alienated (Ludtke, Trautwein, & Husemann, 2009; Roberts et al., 2001; Robins et al., 2001; Vaidya et al., 2002). These changes have been described as evidence of increasing maturity in young men and women as they move toward adulthood (Roberts et al., 2001).

1.2. Continuity and change in mate preferences and mating attitudes

In the current study, we extend previous research on continuity and change in *personality*, to research on continuity and change during emerging adulthood in *mate preferences* and *mating orientations.* Mating is one of the primary challenges of emerging adulthood, and mate preferences and mating orientations are central to nearly any discussion of human mating. Mate preferences, broadly defined as the characteristics that people prioritize in romantic relationship partners (Buss, 1985), predict individuals' partner choices (Li et al., 2013) and the characteristics their romantic partners possess (Botwin, Buss, & Shackelford, 1997). Mating orientations, broadly defined as individuals' stated interest in committed, long-term relationships and in brief or uncommitted sexual relationships (Jackson & Kirkpatrick, 2007), are also tied to a variety of behaviors, such as the tactics people use to attract mates (Bleske-Rechek & Buss, 1996), how long people engage in courtship before engaging in sex (Simpson & Gangestad, 1991), and their likelihood of straying (Ostovich & Sabini, 2004).

Individual differences in mate preferences and orientations, then, appear to reflect differences in individuals' mating behavior and the ways that they approach sexual and romantic relationships. We propose that mate preferences and orientations, like personality traits, function as organizational constructs during emerging adulthood, influencing with whom people choose to become involved and how they respond to relationship opportunities and challenges. Like personality traits, mate preferences and orientations may also be influenced by the challenges of different relationships and partners. We propose that mate preferences and orientations will show patterns of continuity and change during emerging adulthood that are analogous to those observed for broad personality traits.

1.2.1. Rank-order stability

People's mate preferences and orientations are tied to their standing on other attributes that show stability over time, such as mate value (as indexed by physical attractiveness; Buss & Shackelford, 2008) and personality traits such as agreeableness and extraversion (Jonason, Teicher, & Schmitt, 2011). Indeed, researchers have suggested that mating strategies and preferences reflect stable personality dimensions (Nettle & Clegg, 2008). Shackelford, Schmitt, and Buss (2005) offered tangential support for this idea. They assessed adults' mate preferences in their first year of marriage and again in their fourth year of marriage and found moderate rank-order stability (average correlation coefficient of .48). Those same adults also showed moderate consistency over 3 years in the tactics they used to retain their partner (Kaighobadi, Shackelford, & Buss, 2010).

In the current study, we extend previous research on rank-order stability of mate preferences (Shackelford et al., 2005) by surveying emerging adults who have just begun college and who are not married but instead likely to be in the midst of relationship exploration. In the same way that personality stability is less stable during emerging adulthood than in subsequent years (Roberts & DelVecchio, 2000), we expect that emerging adults' mate preferences and orientations will display somewhat less rank-order stability over 3 years of college than will those of married couples in their late twenties (as in Shackelford et al., 2005). We hypothesize that emerging adults will show weak-to-moderate rank-order stability, which would be consistent with the idea that mate preferences and mating orientations guide relationship experiences but also are influenced by them.

1.2.2. Mean-level stability

The research on mean-level continuity and change in personality suggests that as a whole, emerging adults display personality changes that are conducive to keeping a full-time job and developing and maintaining close relationships. We expect that emerging adults' mate preferences and mating attitudes will show similar movement toward increased maturity. Specifically, we hypothesize that they will report decreased interest in short-term mating and increased interest in long-term mating; and that they will place less emphasis on a mate's physical attractiveness and more emphasis on a mate's internal qualities (such as faithfulness, emotional stability, and intelligence). These predictions mirror what college students say about each other: Bleske-Rechek, VandenHeuvel, and Vander Wyst (2009) found that in a sample of U.S. college students, many thought their peers become more long-term oriented and less short-term oriented, and place more emphasis on a partner's personality and less emphasis on a partner's attractiveness, as they head toward their senior year in college.

We are not aware of any research to investigate mean-level change in mating orientations. Shackelford et al.'s (2005) study of married couples is the only one of which we are aware to investigate mean-level change over time in mate preferences. They found little change besides an increased emphasis for both sexes on a mate's pleasing disposition and an increased emphasis for men on a mate's good looks. However, Shackelford et al.'s (2005) participants were already married and beyond emerging adulthood at study onset. If mating attitudes and preferences fluctuate over time, perhaps that fluctuation occurs earlier, during emerging adulthood.

1.3. The current study

In the current study, we tested two primary hypotheses about continuity and change in emerging adults' mate preferences and orientations: First, we hypothesized weak-to-moderate rank-order stability over time; and second, we hypothesized that emerging adults would display mean-level increases in long-term mating orientation and emphasis on mates' internal attributes, and mean-level decreases in short-term mating orientation and emphasis on mates' attractiveness. To test these expectations, we assessed emerging adults' mate preferences and their long-term and short-term mating attitudes at the beginning of college and again 3 years later.

2. Method

2.1. Participants

Original participants were undergraduate students enrolled in an introductory psychology course at a large public university in the Midwestern United States (263 women, 110 men; mean age = 18.78, *SD* = 1.50). The sample was broadly representative of younger students enrolled in the university, which is 65% female. Students represented 40 different programs and departments across the university. Upon informed consent, students completed the paper-and-pencil questionnaire voluntarily as part of a class activity. All but five provided their name, contact information, and consent to be contacted 3 years in the future.

Three years later, we obtained university funding to acquire follow-up responses from 200 of the original participants ($25

incentive). A total of 244 were still enrolled, and we surveyed the first 200 to attend a session (143 women, 57 men; mean age at follow-up = 21.48, *SD* = 1.24). Of the 200, 83% had been first-year students and 99% had been first- or second-year students at Time 1. Participants completed follow-up questionnaires in small-group sessions. Differential attrition analyses revealed that participants who completed follow-up questionnaires did not differ at Time 1 from those who had left the university or failed to attend a follow-up questionnaire session (all *p*s > .14), except that they placed less value on romantic partners' potential for financial success ($p = .001$).

2.2. Materials and procedure

2.2.1. Relationship history

At both time points, participants reported their number of long-term committed relationships (four-month duration or more); number of one-time sex partners; and number of sex partners in the previous year.

2.2.2. Mate preferences

Following others (e.g., Li & Kenrick, 2006), we allotted participants a hypothetical, limited budget of 50 "mate dollars" and asked them to design their ideal romantic partner by distributing their dollars across 10 mate characteristics (Buss, 1989). Participants were not instructed to think of either a long-term partner or short-term partner; we intentionally left the context ambiguous so that participants' dominant mating orientation would be projected onto their allotments. They were instructed to allot between 0 and 10 dollars per characteristic, with more dollars indicating somebody at a higher percentile of the population. Characteristics were presented in alphabetical order (see Table 1). Because participants were prompted via written instructions to check whether their allotments summed to 50, most participants' allotments summed to 50. For participants whose sums were in error but salvageable, we adjusted dollars proportionately to add to 50. Other dollar allotments were not salvageable, resulting in missing scores for five participants.

2.2.3. Mating orientations

Participants responded to items from Jackson and Kirkpatrick's (2007) inventory of short-term and long-term mating orientations. A sample long-term mating item is, "I hope to have a romantic relationship that lasts the rest of my life" (5 items; Time 1 $\alpha = .82$, Time 2 $\alpha = .93$). A sample short-term mating item is, "I can easily imagine myself being comfortable and enjoying 'casual' sex with different partners" (5 items; Time 1 $\alpha = .93$, Time 2 $\alpha = .92$). Participants responded with a seven-point scale (0 = *Strongly Disagree*, 6 = *Strongly Agree*).

Table 1
Rank-order stability from Time 1 to Time 2 in mate preferences and mating orientations.

	Men	Women	Across sex
Mate preferences			
Ambition	.27*	.40***	.38***
Desire for children	.60***	.50***	.54***
Emotional stability	.11	.16	.15*
Faithfulness	.47***	.27**	.33***
Intelligence	.30*	.07	.19**
Physical attractiveness	.36**	.38***	.52***
Potential for financial success	.39**	.12	.24**
Sense of humor	.35**	.46***	.43***
Similar values	.32*	.42***	.38***
Social popularity	.20	.37***	.31***
Mating orientations			
Short-term mating orientation	.67***	.61***	.60***
Long-term mating orientation	.10	.36***	.32***

* $p < .05$.
** $p < .01$.
*** $p < .001$.

3. Results

3.1. Relationship history

To determine whether participants had opportunities to explore different relationships and partners, we looked at the cumulative number of relationship experiences reported at Time 1 and Time 2. As expected, students reported more long-term relationships by Time 2 ($M = 1.77$, $SD = 1.22$) compared to Time 1 ($M = 1.25$, $SD = 1.09$), $t(199) = 7.53$, $p < .001$, $d = 0.53$. They also reported more one-time sexual intercourse partners by Time 2 ($M = 1.09$, $SD = 2.16$) compared to Time 1 ($M = 0.46$, $SD = 1.27$), $t(199) = 5.21$, $p < .001$, $d = 0.37$. These effects replicated within each sex, all *p*s < .001.

3.2. Rank-order stability

Our first hypothesis was that participants would show weak-to-moderate rank-order stability in their mate preferences and orientations. Table 1 displays rank-order stability coefficients for mate preferences and mating orientations. For mate preferences, all correlation coefficients were positive. The majority were weak-to-moderate in magnitude, with a mean rank-order correlation of .35. Participants who allotted more dollars toward a given characteristic at Time 1 tended to allot more dollars toward that characteristic at Time 2, but the overall weak-to-moderate stability suggests that the majority of variance in dollar allotments at the two time points was not overlapping. The dollars allotted to any one characteristic could differ by anywhere between 0 and 10 dollars; the typical participant's change for each characteristic was 1.69 dollars.

In further support for our first hypothesis, mating orientations showed moderate-to-strong rank-order stability. As displayed in Table 1, men and women who expressed positive attitudes toward short-term mating at Time 1 were likely to express positive attitudes toward short-term mating at Time 2. Those who reported more recent sex partners at Time 1 also reported more recent sex partners at Time 2, $r(200) = .43$, $p < .01$. For long-term mating attitudes, women who reported a strong long-term orientation at Time 1 were likely to report it at Time 2. Men's long-term mating orientation scores at Time 1 and Time 2 were not correlated. Because long-term scores were negatively skewed for both sexes at both time points, the correlations for long-term mating orientation were likely weakened by restricted range.

3.3. Mean-level stability

Our second hypothesis was that participants would display mean-level change in the direction of increased emphasis on a mate's internal characteristics and decreased emphasis on a mate's attractiveness, as well as increased interest in long-term mating and decreased interest in short-term mating. Mean-level changes in men's and women's mate dollar allotments and mating orientations are displayed in Table 2. In partial support of the hypothesis, women placed less emphasis on attractiveness, and more emphasis on a partner's ambition, at Time 2 than at Time 1. Men's allotments, however, did not show systematic change except that they placed less importance on a partner's desire for children at Time 2 compared to Time 1. The analyses also revealed no mean-level

Table 2
Mean-level continuity and change in mate preferences and mating orientations, by sex.

	Time 1 *M*(*SD*)	Time 2 *M*(*SD*)	*t*	*d*
Men				
Mate dollar allotments				
Ambition	3.97(2.24)	4.16(2.19)	0.52	0.07
Desire for children*	4.06(2.54)	3.31(2.59)	−2.45	−0.33
Emotional stability	5.07(2.41)	5.78(1.97)	1.77	0.24
Faithfulness	8.29(2.05)	7.89(2.08)	−1.41	−0.19
Intelligence	6.65(1.90)	6.47(1.73)	−0.64	−0.09
Physical attractiveness	6.84(1.81)	6.41(1.59)	−1.62	−0.22
Potential for financial success	2.55(2.38)	2.80(1.96)	0.74	0.10
Sense of humor	5.67(2.46)	5.83(2.39)	0.43	0.06
Similar values	5.33(2.81)	5.96(2.32)	1.56	0.21
Social popularity	1.65(1.80)	1.54(1.59)	−0.36	−0.05
Mating orientation scores				
Short-term mating orientation	2.92(1.71)	3.00(1.79)	0.36	0.05
Long-term mating orientation	5.27(0.76)	5.20(1.12)	−0.45	−0.06
Women				
Mate dollar allotments				
Ambition***	4.66(1.89)	5.63(2.06)	5.27	0.45
Desire for children	4.72(2.51)	4.40(2.33)	−1.56	−0.13
Emotional stability	4.86(1.92)	5.16(2.10)	1.38	0.12
Faithfulness	8.05(2.06)	7.95(1.92)	−0.47	−0.04
Intelligence	5.79(1.45)	5.72(1.65)	−0.42	−0.04
Physical attractiveness*	4.60(1.96)	4.13(1.82)	−2.62	−0.22
Potential for financial success	3.99(2.20)	3.70(2.03)	−1.20	−0.10
Sense of humor	5.66(2.21)	5.58(2.02)	−0.40	−0.03
Similar values	6.03(2.44)	5.91(2.27)	−0.55	−0.05
Social popularity	1.62(1.52)	1.75(1.48)	0.88	0.07
Mating orientation scores				
Short-term mating orientation***	1.50(1.33)	1.93(1.53)	3.63	0.30
Long-term mating orientation	5.60(0.68)	5.63(0.75)	0.37	0.03

Note. Values are presented as Time 2 minus Time 1. Number of participants with complete responses: male $N = 57$, female $N = 138$. Attributes are listed in the order in which they were presented to participants. Dollar allotment values range from 0 to 10. Mating orientation scores range from 0 to 6.
* $p < .05$.
*** $p < .001$.

change in orientation toward long-term mating; both sexes scored very high at both time points. Contrary to the belief that interest in short-term sexual relationships decreases, men's short-term mating orientation did not change over time and women's actually increased. Participants' reports of recent sexual activity aligned with their increased interest in short-term mating. That is, at Time 2 participants had had more sex partners during the past year ($M = 1.35$, $SD = 1.46$) than they had reported at Time 1 ($M = 0.84$, $SD = 1.16$), $t(199) = 5.02$, $p < .001$, $d = 0.36$. This pattern replicated within each sex, $ps < .001$.

In summary, our second hypothesis was not supported. Women allotted fewer dollars toward attractiveness and more dollars toward ambition at Time 2 compared to Time 1, but they did not increase their allotments to other internal attributes such as desire for children and emotional stability. Men did not show any changes consistent with the hypothesis, and as a whole emerging adults did not show more interest in long-term mating and less interest in short-term mating.

3.4. Sex differences

Our findings on rank-order stability and lack of mean-level change over time do not appear to be due to sampling error or bias, because our sample revealed other patterns that have been documented before. For example, although both men and women in the sample scored high in long-term mating attitudes, women scored higher than men did, $ds = -0.59$ and -0.61; and at both time points, men held more favorable attitudes toward short-term mating than women did, $ds = 1.23$ and 0.60 (Jackson & Kirkpatrick, 2007; Schmitt, 2005). Also, at both time points women allotted more dollars than men did toward ambition ($ds = -0.30$ and -0.67) and potential for financial success ($ds = -0.58$ and -0.37), whereas men allotted substantially more dollars than women did toward a partner's physical attractiveness, $ds = 1.48$ and 1.15 (Buss, 1989; Li & Kenrick, 2006; Schmitt, 2014).

4. Discussion

We designed this longitudinal study to determine whether men's and women's mate preferences and orientations show stability during emerging adulthood, or whether they change systematically to reflect increasing emphasis on long-term committed relationships and partners' internal attributes and decreasing interest in short-term relationships and partners' attractiveness. At both time points, men and women expressed strong interest in long-term romantic relationships and comparatively weak interest in short-term sexual relationships; and contrary to expectation, men experienced no attitude change over time and women's willingness to engage in short-term mating increased. Because the university we sampled enrolls more women than men (65:35), we speculate that women's mean change in orientation toward short-term mating may reflect their adjustment to an environment where the sex ratio favors men's desire for sexual variety (Schmitt, 2005).

Men's and women's partner preferences also showed very little mean change over time. Overall, we did not find evidence to support the belief that emerging adults become more oriented toward their partners' internal attributes and less oriented toward short-term sexual relationships and their partners' physical attractiveness.

Indeed, men's emphasis on attractiveness was matched or exceeded only by their emphasis on faithfulness and intelligence.

We know of only one other study on continuity and change in mate preferences (Shackelford et al., 2005); that study, like ours, was over a period of 3 years. However, that study differed from ours. First, their sample consisted mostly of couples moving through their late twenties, whereas our sample consisted of young men and women moving through their late teens and early twenties. Second, Shackelford and colleagues used importance ratings, whereas we utilized a budgeting task that forced participants to make tradeoffs. Hence, our participants and measure of partner preferences were quite different, yet our findings were similar: Mate preferences showed very little change over time.

Over 3 years, the participants in our sample experienced different relationship partners, and the weak-to-moderate, as opposed to strong, rank-order stability in their attitudes and preferences suggests that their varied experiences may have modified their attitudes and preferences. At the same time, the consistency we saw in short-term mating orientation indicates it may be an underlying disposition that influences behavior, or it overlaps with personality traits that influence relationship behavior. Indeed, research has shown that short-term mating orientation is under substantial genetic influence (Bailey, Kirk, Zhu, Dunne, & Martin, 2000) and correlates moderately with major personality traits that are quite stable and heritable, such as social potency and disagreeableness (Jonason et al., 2011).

Future research could investigate processes that contribute to stability versus change in mating attitudes and partner preferences. One process that might promote consistency over time is selection of experiences and partners who perpetuate or reinforce initial attitudes and preferences. People tend to select romantic partners who are similar to themselves not only in attractiveness, intelligence, and social attitudes (Luo & Klohnen, 2005), but also in mate preferences (Buss, 1985) and short-term mating orientation (Bleske-Rechek, Remiker, & Baker, 2009). As Caspi and Herbener (1990) documented, the more similar individuals are to their romantic partners, the more consistency they show over time in their personality profile. If partner preferences and mating attitudes exert the same force on behavior as do broader personality traits (Donnellan, Conger, & Bryant, 2004), then perhaps individuals solidify (or even get trapped in) their initial attitudes and preferences by virtue of the partners they choose and romantic experiences they create (Robins, Caspi, & Moffitt, 2002). Future research could test the prediction that individuals who initiate relationships with others who share their mate preferences and attitudes will show more consistency over time, compared to others, in their preferences and attitudes.

4.1. Limitations

One potential limitation of this study is our use of hypothetical self-report data. However, previous research has shown that stated mate preferences coincide with what people actually seek in real-life mating markets (Li et al., 2013). Research also suggests that self-reported mating attitudes coincide with actual mating behaviors, such as onset of sexual activity and sexual infidelity (Simpson & Gangestad, 1991). In the current sample as well, interest in short-term mating at Time 1 predicted an increase in number of sex partners over time, $r(200) = .48$, $p < .001$.

Although college student samples are ideal for studying emerging adulthood, we do not know whether the findings from our study will generalize to non-college student samples of men and women who are transitioning from adolescence to adulthood. Perhaps the college environment, which encourages independence and exploration, invites more intra-individual change than do non-college environments.

An additional limitation of our study is that it involved only two waves of data collection. We cannot say whether the systematic rise in women's short-term mating orientation occurred at some point during that first year of college, whether it was a gradual increase over the 3 years, or if it occurred just prior to the second wave of data collection. Future studies could incorporate multiple waves of data collection, including waves prior to college and after college. Such research might explore continuity and change in mate preferences and mating orientations as people move into their later twenties and beyond. Because the thirties and forties often involve a rise in status for men and a decline in reproductive capacity (and hence mate value) for women, future studies might explore mean-level change in mate preferences and attitudes over those decades.

4.2. Conclusion

In conclusion, we documented strong continuity in emerging adults' attitudes toward short-term mating; weak continuity in their attitudes toward long-term mating and mate preferences; and substantial mean-level stability in their mating attitudes and partner preferences. Although our sample was relatively homogeneous, this study provides initial evidence that, as a whole, men and women experience little normative change in their mate preferences and attitudes as they transition into adulthood. We hope future researchers will investigate processes that promote continuity versus change in mate preferences and mating orientations over the life span.

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