What’s Worse: Lazy but Smart, or Stupid but Hardworking?
Gender Differences in Mate Preferences and Aversions

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General Background

- Around the world, men and women are similar in some of the characteristics they prefer in a long-term romantic partner (e.g., affection, honesty, and kindness) and different in others (men, more than women, prefer physical attractiveness in their partners, and women more than men prioritize dominance and status).
- Discussions of mate preferences often focus on the characteristics men and women seek in a partner; however, the characteristics that cannot be avoided may be even more important. Negative characteristics can have strong harmful effects on fitness; hence, men and women should psychological adaptations that help them to avoid fitness-compromising characteristics in a partner even more strongly than they pursue fitness-enhancing characteristics.
- In fact, gender-differentiated priorities manifest in characteristics individuals most avoid in a long-term romantic partner; for example, men trade-off status and resources in a partner more often who women do in order to have a physically attractive mate. More than women also respond more critically to information about a potential mate’s physical attractiveness when framed negatively rather than positively, and women more than men respond more critically to information about a potential mate’s earning potential and ambition when framed negatively rather than positively.
- The current studies are designed to build on previous research. In Study 1, we compare the strength with which young adults pursue positive mate characteristics with the strength with which they avoid negative mate characteristics. We also compare gender differences in the pursuit of positive mate characteristics and gender differences in the avoidance of negative mate characteristics. In Study 2, we, through forced choice options, systematically document the positive traits the sexes most prioritize and the negative traits they must avoid.
- Our guiding hypothesis was that, given the fitness costs of poor mating decisions, gender differences in the avoidance of negative attributes (such as “unattractive” and “lazy”) would be even more robust than previously documented gender differences in the pursuit of positive attributes (such as “attractive” and “hardworking”).

Study 1: Continuous Ratings of Positive and Negative Characteristics

- In study 1, we utilized previous literature and an act nomination procedure to generate a comprehensive list of 76 positive attributes and their parallel negative counterparts.
- The positively framed mate preferences questionnaire asked participants (N=309) to consider a potential long-term mate, and, recognizing that every individual comes with drawbacks, rate each of the 76 negative attributes on a scale of “I don’t need this in a partner” (0) to “I absolutely must have this in a partner” (5).
- The negatively framed mate aversions questionnaire asked participants (N=106) to consider a potential long-term mate, and, recognizing that every individual comes with drawbacks, rate each of the 76 negative attributes on a scale of “I could deal with this” (0) to “No, this is an absolute deal-breaker” (5).
- The 76 attributes were categorized into 14 major themes, as seen in the graphs on the left. As revealed by a comparison of the dashed lines, and contrary to our expectations, participants tended to avoid more strongly the positive attributes (N=35) than the negative attributes (N=30).
- As predicted, gender differences in avoidance of negative traits were far more pronounced than gender differences in preference for positive traits.
- As shown in Figure 2, women more than men preferred a hardworking and wealthy/high status partner; men more than women preferred a caring and domestic partner.
- As shown in Figure 3, women more than men avoided an unreliable, cold/unfeeling, uncultivated, lazy, unexpressive, submissive, poor/bad status, and unambitious partner. There were no items in this portion of our study that men avoided significantly more than women.

Study 2: Forced Tradeoffs of Positive and Negative Characteristics

- In study 2, we began with 11 core traits and their negative counterparts (e.g., smart/stupid, good-looking/ugly). In a series of 55 trade-off questions, we pitted each trait against each one of the other traits.
- In the positive framing of the questions, participants (N=211) were asked which was better as a long-term mate, someone who was “K” (positive trait) but “Y” (negative trait), or “Y” (positive trait) but “K” (negative trait). An example is shown below.

What type of person is BETTER as a long-term romantic partner?

Smart BUT Ugly

Good Looking BUT Stupid

- In the negative framing of the questions, participants (N=189) were asked which was worse as a long-term mate, someone who was “K” (negative trait) but “Y” (positive trait), or “Y” (negative trait) but “K” (positive trait). An example is shown below.

What type of person is WORSE as a long-term romantic partner?

Ugly BUT Smart

Stupid BUT Good Looking

- As shown in Figure 3, in the positive frame, women more often than men traded off other positive traits to obtain a partner who was thoughtful, polite, and family-oriented; men more often than women traded off other positive traits to obtain a mate who was good-looking and smart.
- As shown in Figure 4, in the negative frame, women more often than men traded off other negative traits to avoid a partner who was ugly or stupid.

General Discussion

- In two studies, we investigated men’s and women’s self-reported pursuit of positive traits, relative to their avoidance of the negative counterparts of these traits, in a potential long-term partner.
- Across the studies, both sexes showed strong preferences for reliability (loyalty), warmth, and thoughtfulness in a partner, relative to other traits; and both sexes avoided the negative counterparts of these traits.
- Contrary to expectation, Study 1 participants did not avoid negative traits more strongly than they pursued the positive traits. We believe there may be many factors at play in explaining participants’ relative lack of concern for negative characteristics, such as inflated optimism among young adults about their likelihood of finding, attracting, and keeping a long-term partner who has few, if any, character flaws. The sexes differed predictably. Women in Study 1 preferred a mate who was hard-working and of high status more than men did. Women also avoided many negative attributes more strongly than men did, including a partner who is lazy, submissive, of low status, and uncultivated.
- Contrary to effects documented in past studies, men in Study 1 did not report a stronger preference than women for a physically attractive partner, nor did men rate unattractiveness as any more of a deal-breaker than women did. However, in Study 2, when participants were forced to choose between traits, men more often than women traded off other positive traits to obtain a mate who was good-looking, and men more often than women settled for other negative traits in order to avoid a partner who was ugly; these effects were the largest we observed across the two studies, and they demonstrate that for men more than for women, attractiveness is a necessity more than a luxury.

References


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Number of times chosen

What type of person is BETTER as a long-term romantic partner?

Smart BUT Ugly

Good Looking BUT Stupid

What type of person is WORSE as a long-term romantic partner?

Ugly BUT Smart

Stupid BUT Good Looking

Figure 3: The number of times that participants chose each trait as more important in a mate, when pitted against each of the other traits. Error bars represent ± 2 SEM. Asterisks denote statistically reliable sex differences.

Figure 4: The number of times that participants actively avoided each trait in a mate by opting for a different negative trait it was pitted against. Error bars represent ± 2 SEM. Asterisks denote statistically reliable sex differences.