Women’s mating preferences

What does a woman really want?
preferences are context-dependent

female choice for "good genes"
  ▶ MHC diversity
  ▶ health and symmetry
  ▶ masculinity?

female choice for resources

female choice for male investment

women face tradeoffs; preferences are context-dependent
Female choices: changing times

Rank ordering of mate preferences among Iowa undergrads, across 7 decades (from Christine Whelen)

WOMEN: PARTNER TRAITS THAT ROSE IN IMPORTANCE

1939 RANK | 2008 RANK
---|---
1 | 1 Mutual Attraction / Love
2 | 2 Dependable Character
3 | 3 Emotional Stability / Maturity
4 | 4 Desire for Home / Children
5 | 5 Education / Intelligence
6 | 6 Sociability
7 | 7 Pleasing Disposition
8 | 8 Ambition / Industriousness
9 | 9 Good Health
10 | 10 Good Financial Prospects
11 | 11 Similar Education Bkgrnd
12 | 12 Good Looks
13 | 13 Refinement / Neatness
14 | 14 Similar Religious Bkgrnd
15 | 15 Good cook, Housekeeper
16 | 16 Favorable Social Status
17 | 17 Similar Political Bkgrnd
18 | 18 Chastity

WOMEN: PARTNER TRAITS THAT DECLINED IN IMPORTANCE

1939 RANK | 2008 RANK
---|---
1 | 1 Mutual Attraction / Love
2 | 2 Dependable Character
3 | 3 Emotional Stability / Maturity
4 | 4 Desire for Home / Children
5 | 5 Education / Intelligence
6 | 6 Sociability
7 | 7 Pleasing Disposition
8 | 8 Ambition / Industriousness
9 | 9 Good Health
10 | 10 Good Financial Prospects
11 | 11 Similar Education Bkgrnd
12 | 12 Good Looks
13 | 13 Refinement / Neatness
14 | 14 Similar Religious Bkgrnd
15 | 15 Good cook, Housekeeper
16 | 16 Favorable Social Status
17 | 17 Similar Political Bkgrnd
18 | 18 Chastity
Female choice for good genes
Female choice for good genes: Sexual selection for tail length in long-tailed widowbirds

Top: no difference in female nests in territory before experiment.

Bottom: Mating success went down after tails were cut, and up when tails were lengthened.
Control I (unmanipulated)
Control II (cut and re-glued, same length).

from Andersson 1982.
Female choice for good genes

- Men don’t have fancy feathers. Do women care about “good genes”?
- What are “good” genes anyway, and how can a woman tell?
  - MHC diversity and pathogen resistance
  - Fluctuating asymmetry and health
  - Testosterone and masculine features?
- Note, just because women attend to these cues doesn’t mean they evolved through “mate choice” sexual selection.
Female choice for good genes: MHC diversity

Women judge men heterozygous at MHC loci to be more attractive and healthy, irrespective of MHC similarity.

(C. Roberts et al. 2005).
Good genes: health, symmetry, and attractiveness

Women prefer healthy, symmetrical men

Oxidative stress (a health risk factor) in men associated with:
- fluctuating asymmetry (FA)
- women’s ratings of attractiveness, health, and masculinity

(from Gangstad et al. 2010)
Female choice for good genes may be context-dependent pathogen prevalence in society by rated importance of physical attractiveness in a mate. (from Gangestad and Buss)
Good genes: Is masculinity a sign of good immunity?

- Testosterone (T) promotes masculine features
- Testosterone is thought to suppress the immune system
- Yet some think masculinity signals heritable disease resistance (only “immunocompetent” males can “afford” high T)
- Data on T and immunity are weak and conflicting
- e.g.: Gangestad study (last slide): healthy men were rated more attractive and masculine, but did not have higher T
- Most studies find that women do not prefer extreme masculine features. Masculine features probably evolved as a signal to other men (not women) of toughness, not health
Female choice for good resources

You want to impress me, Frank?
Get a job and move out of your Mom's basement.
Female choice for good resources: meat for sex

Female hanging flies mate for a longer time if the male brings a larger prey item for her to eat during copulation. The male benefits from long copulation because he fertilizes more eggs.
Female choice for good resources: 37 cultures study

37 cultures rated importance (0-3) of “good financial prospect” in a marriage partner. (Buss 1989)

- Sex difference found in 36/37 cultures
- Large cultural differences in importance of financial resources
- Similar sex difference (29/37 cultures) in “ambition and industriousness”
Female choice for good resources

Figure 7.4. The percentage of Hadza women and men who cited various traits as important in a potential spouse ($n = 36$ females, $n = 46$ males). The only significant differences between the sexes are on the traits fertility and intelligence.
Female choice for male investment

But will he stay around, and how can she know?
Female choice for male investment

- women accurately assessed men’s self-reported interest in infants from photograph
- men’s interest in infants correlated with desirability as long-term mate (not short-term mate)
- assessment mediated by positive (happy vs angry) expression (from Roney et al. 2006)
Female preferences are context-dependent

Feminized faces seen as more honest, caring, sensitive.
British women prefer more feminized faces in a long-term partner.
British women prefer more feminized faces than Jamaican women.
preferences are context-dependent

female choice for “good genes”
  MHC diversity
  health and symmetry
  masculinity?

female choice for resources

female choice for male investment

women face tradeoffs; preferences are context-dependent