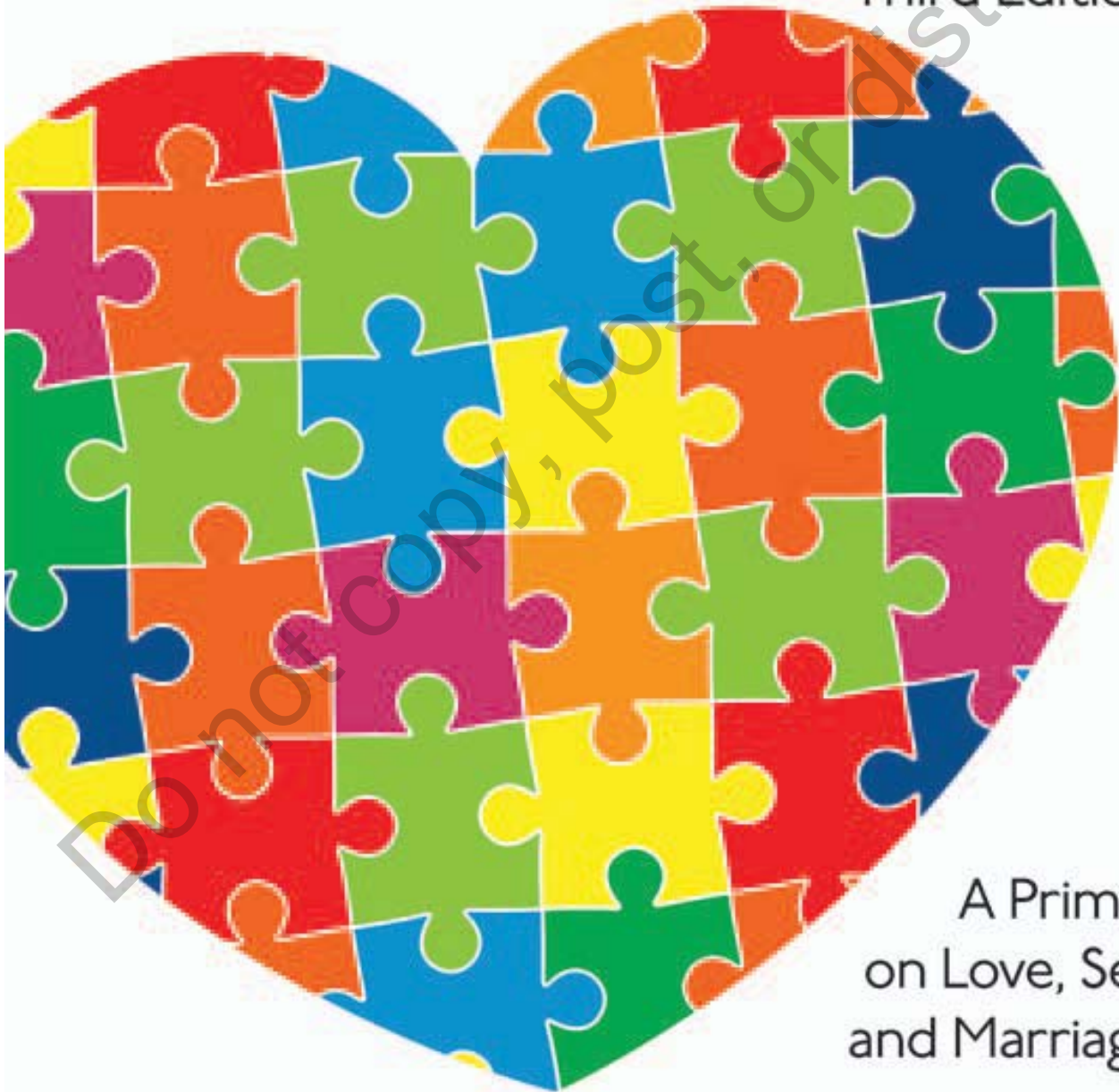


# THE MATING GAME

Third Edition



A Primer  
on Love, Sex,  
and Marriage

**PAMELA C. REGAN**



Copyright ©2017 by SAGE Publications, Inc.

This work may not be reproduced or distributed in any form or by any means without express written permission of the publisher.

# 1

## Mate Preferences



### Chapter Outline

Theoretical Approaches to Human Mating

    Social Context Theories: The World That Is

    Evolutionary Models: The World That Was

Methods Used to Examine Mate Preferences

Empirical Evidence

    Individual and Group Differences

Continuing Debates

    Do We Always Get What We Want? The Issue of Compromise

    Do We Always Know What We Want? The Issues of

    Self-Report and Hypothetical Ideals

Summary

This chapter is divided into two sections. The first section explores the theories that social and behavioral scientists have formulated in an attempt to make sense of human mating dynamics. The second section examines research that speaks to the utility of these theoretical frameworks; specifically, it explores what is known about the attributes, traits, and characteristics people actually prefer and seek in their dates and mates.

## ❖ THEORETICAL APPROACHES TO HUMAN MATING

In general, theoretical approaches to human mating relationships tend to fall into two broad categories. The first category emphasizes how mate preferences are influenced by social forces created by and residing within the contemporary environment. The second category focuses on evolutionary forces that arose in the ancient past and that form part of our species' heritage.

### Social Context Theories: The World That Is

*Social context* frameworks focus on proximal mechanisms—that is, forces located in the contemporary social, cultural, and historical milieu—that influence mate preferences and mate selection.

*Social exchange or equity models* of mate selection represent one such framework (e.g., Blau, 1964; Murstein, 1970, 1976; Walster, Walster, & Berscheid, 1978; for reviews, see Hatfield & Rapson, 2012, and Sprecher, 1998). According to these models, the process of mate selection resembles a marketplace in which people attempt to maximize their rewards and make social interaction as profitable as possible by exchanging their own assets—beauty, health, intelligence, a sense of humor, kindness, wealth, status, and so on—for desirable attributes in a partner. A person's own "value" as a potential partner is presumed to influence the extent to which he or she is able to attract and retain a high-value partner. Since people seek the best possible value in a potential mate, but are constrained by their own assets, this process is assumed to result in the pairing of individuals of roughly equal value. That is, "wealthy" individuals who possess a great many desirable characteristics, or who have high amounts of a few particularly valuable attributes, will be able to attract and pair with others of equally high value. "Poorer" persons, or those who have fewer assets to offer a potential mate, inevitably will form liaisons with less valuable and less "expensive" others.

Exchange theorists argue that mating mistakes are costly. For example, in his discussion of the early stages of mate selection, theorist Bernard Murstein (1970) noted that although an individual may run less risk of rejection if he or she seeks a less desirable partner (low cost), the rewards of such a conquest are correspondingly meager (low profit); at the same time, the increased likelihood of rejection (high cost) associated with seeking a partner who is substantially more desirable than oneself (high profit) renders this enterprise equally risky.

Consequently, an accurate perception of one's own qualities and what one has to contribute or offer to a relationship is believed to be extremely important. In sum, based on a consideration of the basic principles of social exchange models of mate selection, we might expect people to prefer potential partners who possess a host of socially desirable characteristics, to moderate these preferences by taking into account their own attributes, and to ultimately pair with similar others.

*Social role theory* is another social context perspective that has been used to understand and explain (heterosexual) mate selection (e.g., Eagly, 1987; Eagly & Wood, 2012; Eagly, Wood, & Johannesen-Schmidt, 2004). Social role theorists posit that people develop expectations for their own and for other people's behavior based on their beliefs about sex-appropriate behavior and attributes. Such beliefs and expectations are assumed to arise from the distribution of men and women in different social roles in natural settings. For men, these roles have historically been occupational and economic; for women, these roles have traditionally been domestic. To the extent that people prefer others to behave in accordance with existing sex role stereotypes, traditionally "male" characteristics and attributes—including having a high-paying job; accruing resources; and displaying assertiveness, ambition, strength, competitiveness, and other "masculine" traits—may be viewed as important features for men to possess (and may be valued more by [heterosexual] women than by men when considering and selecting a potential mate). Conversely, traditionally "female" characteristics and attributes—including expressing nurturance; displaying emotional warmth, intimacy, and cooperation; and being concerned with one's physical appearance—may be considered important features for women to possess and therefore may be valued more by (heterosexual) men than by women when selecting a potential partner. Based on this perspective, then, we might expect that the features that are considered desirable in a mate will shift as the social roles that men and women typically occupy change over time.

Social context theorists also have identified a variety of other social forces that shape men's and women's mating behavior, including *social and cultural scripts*, which are normative expectations that define and organize social experience and are used to guide and assess social behavior (e.g., Gagnon & Simon, 1973; Reiss, 1967, 1981, 1986; Simon & Gagnon, 1986); *social learning processes*, including the patterns of reinforcement and punishment that people receive for their romantic and sexual behavior (e.g., Hogben & Byrne, 1998; Mischel, 1966); and *sexual regimes*, which consist of culturally specific normative orientations and

traditions associated with sexuality (e.g., Laumann et al., 2006; Widmer, Treas, & Newcomb, 1998). Individuals learn the prevailing socio-cultural “rules” of love, sex, and mating from a host of social forces including the media (e.g., television, Internet, magazines), parents and peers, the educational system, religious and political ideologies, legal principles, and so forth. For example, modern U.S. society and other Western cultures emphasize the importance of mutual attraction and individual choice in the selection of a romantic partner and hold fairly permissive attitudes with respect to male and female sexuality. Other societies emphasize family involvement in the choice of a marriage partner and hold more restrictive views of sexuality (particularly female sexuality). Given these existing sociocultural differences, we might expect to find that preferences for particular partner attributes, along with attitudes about love, sex, and marriage, will vary as a function of culture.

All of these contemporary social mechanisms—scripts, sexual regimes, social learning processes, sex-based beliefs and expectations, and social exchange—undoubtedly contribute to men’s and women’s mating preferences, behavior, and outcomes.

### **Evolutionary Models: The World That Was**

*The mind is a set of information-processing machines that were designed by natural selection to solve adaptive problems faced by our hunter-gatherer ancestors.*

—Cosmides and Tooby (1997, p. 1)

*Evolutionary models* of human mating are derived from the theoretical principles of evolutionary psychology, encapsulated in the preceding quotation. Specifically, according to noted evolutionary theorists Leda Cosmides and John Tooby (1997; also see Tooby & Cosmides, 1992), evolutionary psychology is concerned with the design of the human mind or the neural circuits we possess that process information. Evolutionary psychologists conceive of the mind as composed of many specialized processing systems. For example, we possess neural circuitry that is specialized for use in mate selection, just as we possess neural circuitry for language acquisition and for food selection. In addition, evolutionary psychologists agree that the human mind (all of our neural circuitry) was designed by the processes of natural and sexual selection originally articulated by naturalist Charles Darwin (1859, 1871). Relatedly, the human mind is believed to be designed to solve *adaptive problems* or recurrent issues in human evolutionary

history that had implications for reproduction and survival. One of the most significant of these adaptive problems involved the selection, attraction, and retention of a suitable mate. Finally, evolutionary psychology is oriented toward our species' distant past. The human mind was designed to solve adaptive problems that existed eons ago and that affected the daily lives of our earliest ancestors. With these principles in mind, evolutionary models of mating consider the ways in which contemporary mating behavior might be influenced by evolved psychological heuristics that were selected because they overcame obstacles to reproduction located in the human ancestral past and therefore maximized reproductive success.

Evolutionary models target four different types of partner attributes that could conceivably have affected reproductive success among early humans (see Buss & Kenrick, 1998; Cunningham, Druen, & Barbee, 1997; Gangestad & Simpson, 1990, 2000; Regan, 2002). The first attributes center on the partner's *emotional fitness*. Evolutionary models recognize that the human biological design favors the formation of enduring (long-term and committed) relationships. Specifically, because human offspring are characterized by a period of dependency that extends well beyond infancy, successful pair-bonding and child rearing in the ancestral past depended, for both sexes, on the ability to select a mate who could and would provide sustained social and emotional support. Those early humans who selected emotionally fit partners achieved greater reproductive success than those who did not; hence, the former's genes survived. As a result of this genetic legacy, contemporary men and women are presumed to be particularly desirous of a long-term partner who possesses prosocial personality characteristics that indicate an ability and a willingness to emotionally commit to the reproductive partner, the reproductive relationship, and any resulting offspring.

In addition to dispositional attributes related to emotional fitness, evolutionary models suggest that reproductive success would have been dependent, for both sexes, on selecting a partner who possessed *physical or genetic fitness*—namely, a sexually mature, healthy individual who was capable of reproduction; who would pass on “good” genetic material to any resulting offspring; and who was physically able to contribute to the reproductive relationship, the partner, and the offspring. Insofar as physical appearance served as an external indicant or “honest advertisement” of underlying genetic fitness, reproductive status, and health in the ancestral environment (e.g., Fisher, 1958; Gangestad, 1993), appearance attributes are believed to play an important role in the mating decisions of both sexes today.

A third class of adaptively significant feature includes those interpersonal attributes that promote the successful formation and maintenance of a committed pair-bond. Evolutionarily speaking, an appropriate mate is one who not only possesses emotional and physical fitness, but who additionally demonstrates *relational fitness*—the ability and motivation to become exclusively attached to one particular individual, to ignore the temptations posed by other individuals, and to confine reproductively relevant behaviors (e.g., emotional, sexual, economic, social) to the primary relationship. A number of characteristics are indicative of relational fitness, including mutual attraction or love, exclusivity, and similarity between partners. Those early humans who chose to pursue and establish a relationship with an individual who did not reciprocate their feelings of attraction, who did not confine his or her sexual and emotional activities to the primary relationship, and/or whose characteristics were not compatible with their own would have experienced lower levels of reproductive success than would those men and women who selected a more appropriate partner. Thus, contemporary men and women are presumed to prefer as a mate an individual who loves them passionately (and with whom they are themselves in love); who is willing to form an exclusive (i.e., monogamous and faithful) partnership; and who resembles them along important demographic, personality, and attitudinal dimensions.

The final category of feature that may have served to promote reproductive success in the ancestral environment is *social fitness*. In the ancestral environment, men and women who based their reproductive decisions at least partly on social fitness considerations—that is, who selected as mates individuals with strong ties to the existing community; with some degree of status or position within that community; and with the ability to provide tangible resources in the form of food, shelter, and physical protection—would have enjoyed a higher degree of reproductive success than would men and women who chose to ignore or undervalue social fitness. Consequently, contemporary humans are presumed to prefer mates who possess attributes that reflect the ability to successfully negotiate the social hierarchy.

Although all men and women are assumed to be desirous of mates who possess emotional, physical, relational, and social fitness, some evolutionary models posit sex differences in preferences for particular partner attributes. *Parental investment-based* models (e.g., Buss & Schmitt, 1993; Kenrick, Sadalla, Groth, & Trost, 1990) hypothesize that women, who invest more direct physiological resources in their offspring than do men (e.g., contributing body nutrients during

pregnancy and lactation), will be more sensitive to resource limitations and thus will be particularly attentive to a reproductive partner's social fitness (e.g., status, ability to provide resources). Men, on the other hand, are assumed to be constrained by access to women who can produce viable offspring and thus should be relatively more sensitive than women to characteristics that reflect physical fitness, including health and reproductive capacity.

Although men and women are assumed to differ with respect to the emphasis they place on particular partner attributes, they are believed to hold similar standards and to be relatively equally selective with respect to their partners. Specifically, because human males as well as females invest heavily in offspring, mating mistakes—selecting a partner who is unable to provide resources, who is capricious and emotionally unstable, who is infertile and unhealthy—are extremely costly to both sexes in the long-term relational context. Thus, parental investment theories posit that both men and women will be highly—and equally—discriminating in their choice of a long-term partner.

## ❖ METHODS USED TO EXAMINE MATE PREFERENCES

Not only have a variety of theories been developed to explain human mating, but there also are several different methods for exploring the attributes people seek in potential (hypothetical) partners. By far the most common methods used involve self-report. For example, many of the early (and some of the more recent) investigations employed a *ranking procedure* in which participants ordered or organized features in terms of their importance or desirability (e.g., Hill, 1945; Regan & Berscheid, 1997). Other researchers have chosen to use a *rating procedure* in which participants evaluate the importance or desirability of features with Likert-type scales (e.g., Dijkstra, Barelds, Groothof, Ronner, & Nauta, 2012; Wiederman & Allgeier, 1992). Still others have used a *percentile ranking procedure* in which participants indicate how much of a particular characteristic they would like a potential partner to possess relative to other same-sex people (e.g., Kenrick, Groth, Trost, & Sadalla, 1993; Regan, 1998d). And some researchers have utilized a *budget allocation procedure* in which participants receive a set number of “mate dollars” that they can distribute among (that is, use to “purchase”) various attributes in a hypothetical partner (e.g., Li, Bailey, Kenrick, & Linsenmeier, 2002; Li, Valentine, & Patel, 2011). These four self-report methods are illustrated in Table 1.1.



**Table 1.1** Four Self-Report Methods for Investigating Mate Preferences**Instructions**

We are interested in exploring the attributes that people seek in a long-term, romantic partner—a steady date, a spouse or domestic partner, someone with whom you might cohabit and/or raise children. Below, you will find a list of attributes or characteristics that you might want a long-term, romantic partner to possess. After you read over the entire list, please evaluate these characteristics using the four different methods described below. Take your time and think carefully about your ratings.

**Scoring***Column 1: Rank order*

Read over the entire list of attributes and rank order them from most to least important (1 = most important characteristic to me, 2 = second most important characteristic to me, etc.).

*Column 2: Rating scale*

Rate the importance of each attribute to you in this type of partner using the following scale:

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Not at all important						Extremely important

*Column 3: Percentile ranking*

Indicate how you would like your partner to rank on each attribute, compared to other men or women, using the following scale:

My perfect partner is above \_\_\_\_\_% of other men (women) on this attribute.

Note: Scores can range from 0 to 99. For example, a score of 50 means that your partner is above 50% and below 49% of others on this characteristic (exactly average). A score of 35 means that your partner is above 35% and below 64% of the population (below average). A score of 80 means that your partner is above 80% and below 19% of all other men/women on this attribute (above average).

*Column 4: Budget allocation*

You have a budget of 500 “mate dollars” you may use to obtain percentile points across these 10 characteristics. Each dollar corresponds to one percentile point. An allocation of \$50 for a particular characteristic means that your partner will be average (at the 50th percentile) on this characteristic; an allocation of \$100 means that your partner will have more of that attribute than other men (or women). Use your budget to create your ideal partner.

<i>Characteristic Allocation</i>	<i>Column 1 Rank Order</i>	<i>Column 2 Importance</i>	<i>Column 3 Percentile</i>	<i>Column 4 Budget</i>
Intelligent	_____	_____	_____	_____
Kind and understanding	_____	_____	_____	_____
Emotionally stable	_____	_____	_____	_____
Honest and trustworthy	_____	_____	_____	_____
Physically attractive	_____	_____	_____	_____
Good sense of humor	_____	_____	_____	_____
High social status	_____	_____	_____	_____
Similar to you (interests, values, etc.)	_____	_____	_____	_____
Good housekeeper	_____	_____	_____	_____
Sexually experienced	_____	_____	_____	_____

Some researchers have chosen to conduct *content analyses* of personal ads in an attempt to identify the partner attributes people seek (e.g., Davis, 1990; Deaux & Hanna, 1984; Lawson, James, Jansson, Koyama, & Hill, 2014; Smith, Konik, & Tuve, 2011). Finally, some researchers have examined the importance of particular attributes *experimentally* by manipulating the features that a target individual possesses and examining the impact of this manipulation on participants' perceptions (e.g., self-reported desire to date the target; Graziano, Jensen-Campbell, Todd, & Finch, 1997; Ha, van den Berg, Engels, & Lichtwarck-Aschoff, 2012; Townsend & Levy, 1990). As discussed below, some of these methods may provide a more accurate picture of mate preference than others.

## ❖ EMPIRICAL EVIDENCE

The mate preference literature is enormous and encompasses a myriad of research studies, all of which generally indicate that men and women overwhelmingly prefer a long-term partner who possesses intelligence, emotional stability, an honest and trustworthy disposition, an exciting overall personality, and a physically attractive appearance. In two of the first documented examinations of mate preference, both conducted during the late 1930s and early 1940s, social scientists Harold Christensen (1947) and Reuben Hill (1945) asked college students at their respective universities to rank order a list of characteristics in terms of their importance in a romantic partner. The two most important attributes, according to both samples of participants, were "dependable character" and "emotional stability and maturity." Men and women also emphasized a "pleasing disposition," "good health," "desire for home and children," and "mutual attraction or love." Less important attributes included "similar political background" (unimportant to men and women in both samples), "good cook/housekeeper" (unimportant to women), and "good financial prospect" (unimportant to men). Other researchers have since replicated these results using the same or very similar lists of features (e.g., Hudson & Henze, 1969; McGinnis, 1958; Perilloux, Fleischman, & Buss, 2011; Regan & Berscheid, 1997). Table 1.2 illustrates these findings.

In more recent years, researchers have examined people's preferences for a larger variety of characteristics. For example, social psychologist Pamela Regan and her colleagues (Regan, Levin, Sprecher, Christopher, & Cate, 2000) asked men and women to indicate their preferences for 23 individual attributes. Both sexes reported desiring a

**Table 1.2** Top 10 Desired Characteristics in a Marriage Partner

<i>What Do Men Say They Want?</i>	<i>What Do Women Say They Want?</i>
Good overall personality	Honesty and trustworthiness
Honesty and trustworthiness	Kindness and compassion
Attractive appearance	Good overall personality
Intelligence	Intelligence
Good health	Attentive to one's partner
Kindness and compassion	Good sense of humor
Good sense of humor	Self-confidence
Self-confidence	Good health
Attentive to one's partner	Attractive appearance
Easygoing nature	Easygoing nature

SOURCE: Regan, P. C., & Berscheid, E. (1997). Gender differences in characteristics desired in a potential sexual and marriage partner. *Journal of Psychology and Human Sexuality* (9)1, 25–37. Copyright © 1997 by the Haworth Press Inc.

NOTE: In this study, men and women were asked to rank order (from most to least desirable in a marriage partner) a list of attributes similar to the ones used by Christensen (1947), Hill (1945), and other early mate selection researchers. This table shows the top 10 most desired characteristics, arranged in order from highest to lowest ranking. As can be seen from the results, men and women tend to desire similar attributes in a marriage partner, although there is also evidence that men rank external attributes (health, appearance) higher than do women.

long-term romantic partner who possessed a great deal of the following characteristics, in order of importance:

1. *Prosocial personality attributes.* First and foremost, participants desired a mate who possessed prosocial personality attributes related to interpersonal responsiveness. Men and women emphasized the importance of a good sense of humor and an exciting personality, and they sought someone who was expressive and open and who had a friendly and sociable disposition.
2. *Characteristics related to intellect and mental drive.* Only slightly less important were characteristics related to intellect and mental drive. Both men and women sought a partner who was intellectually gifted and driven—who possessed intelligence, who was educated, and who was ambitious.

3. *Physically appealing attributes.* Although considered less important than the first two attribute categories, participants also desired a mate who was physically appealing. Both men and women emphasized a physically attractive, athletic, sexy, and healthy appearance when evaluating a long-term romantic partner.
4. *Similarity.* In addition, similarity—on demographic characteristics, values and attitudes, and interests and hobbies—was considered relatively important by the participants.
5. *Characteristics related to social status.* The least important (but still moderately desired) partner attributes were those related to social status and resources. Specifically, participants preferred a partner who was above average with respect to earning potential, who possessed at least moderate social status, and who had access to material possessions.

In addition to exploring what people seek in potential partners, some researchers have examined the attributes that people seek to *avoid* when selecting dates or mates. For example, social scientists Michael Cunningham, Anita Barbee, and Perri Druen (1996; also see Ault & Philhower, 2001; Cunningham et al., 1997; Cunningham, Shamblen, Barbee, & Ault, 2005) argue that the process of mate selection requires individuals to evaluate their partners not only in terms of the positive qualities they offer but also in terms of whether their negative qualities can be endured. Research on these undesirable partner attributes or *social allergens* reveals that men and women are repulsed by people who consistently violate social norms and rules of conduct, including drinking to excess, cheating at games, gossiping about others, arriving late all the time, and lying. In addition, they dislike partners who are oversexed—that is, who brag about sexual conquests or skills, constantly talk about or mention previous relationship partners, or gaze longingly at other men or women. People also seek to avoid partners who have uncouth habits (e.g., demonstrate poor grooming, display poor table manners, stand too close or stare inappropriately, use a loud speaking voice). In sum, individuals seek a potential mate who not only fulfills their desires but who also manages to avoid doing the things that repulse them.

Not only do men and women desire—and seek to avoid—similar features when considering a potential mate, but they are equally discriminating. Psychologist Douglas Kenrick and his colleagues (1993) asked a sample of young adults to indicate their minimum mate selection standards or the lowest level of various characteristics that they would consider acceptable when selecting a marriage partner. Their results revealed that neither men nor women would consider marrying

someone unless he or she was above average (the 50th percentile) on nearly all attributes. In fact, summed across all characteristics, men's minimally acceptable mate scored at the 56th percentile and women's minimally acceptable partner scored at the 60th percentile. Regan (1998a) reported similar results. When it comes to choosing a long-term mate, both sexes appear to be highly selective.

### Individual and Group Differences

We have seen that men and women have similar preferences with respect to their long-term romantic partners. In fact, there are only two attribute categories on which men and women demonstrate consistent differences, at least in self-report studies: physical appearance and social status. Specifically, when considering attributes in a hypothetical romantic partner, men tend to emphasize physical attractiveness more than do women, and women tend to emphasize social or economic position more than do men (for an early review, see Feingold, 1992). For example, Susan Sprecher, Quintin Sullivan, and Elaine Hatfield (1994) asked a large, national sample of men and women to indicate how willing they would be to marry someone who possessed a variety of characteristics. The results revealed that men reported being significantly less willing than women to marry someone who was "not good looking," whereas women reported being significantly less willing than men to marry a partner who was "not likely to hold a steady job" and who "would earn less than you." *Neither* sex, however, was very willing to marry an individual with these attributes. Thus, it is not the case that attractiveness is *unimportant* to women or that social status does *not* matter to men; rather, both sexes appear to value each of these two attributes, but to different degrees.

Interestingly, men's and women's preferences for these characteristics appear to be changing over time. Using the same measurement instrument as Christensen (1947) and Hill (1945), social scientists David Buss, Todd Shackelford, Lee Kirkpatrick, and Randy Larsen (2001) compared the preferences of men and women across a 57-year span (from 1939 to 1996). Not surprisingly, they found that the same core set of positive personality attributes were highly valued across time (i.e., dependable character, emotional stability and maturity, and pleasing disposition). In addition, however, the researchers discovered that "good looks" became more highly valued by women over time (that is, rose in rank value from 1939 to 1996), whereas "good financial prospect" became more highly valued by men over time.

Culture is another variable that appears to be associated with romantic partner preferences. Although men and women from around the world value the same set of dispositional features (e.g., emotional stability,

honesty and trustworthiness, kindness, humor, openness, a dependable character, intelligence; see Lippa, 2007; Pearce, Chuikova, Ramsey, & Galyautdinova, 2010; White, Pearce, & Khramtsova, 2011), robust cultural differences exist. For example, adults from traditional, collectivist countries and regions, such as China, Malaysia, Singapore, India, and Eastern Europe, tend to value demographic similarity (e.g., same religion, caste) and “practical” characteristics that reflect competence as a potential spouse and parent (e.g., family orientation, neatness, chastity, money-mindedness) more than do adults from modern, individualist countries and regions, such as the United States, the United Kingdom, Canada, and Western Europe (Buss et al., 1990; Goodwin & Tang, 1991; Sprecher & Chandak, 1992; Toro-Morn & Sprecher, 2003). The emphasis placed on these particular constellations of features is understandable when we consider that many collectivist cultures have a history of (and still practice) arranged marriage. Selecting a partner on the basis of practical considerations and demographic similarity increases the likelihood that the partners will be compatible, that the marriage will function smoothly, and that the couple will receive approval and support from their families and other social groups. Scientist Yacoub Khallad (2005) examined mate preferences among a sample of men and women from a collectivist and highly conservative patriarchal culture in the Middle East (Jordan). Although mutual attraction and love and positive personality attributes received the highest ratings, participants also emphasized characteristics associated with the traditional social values of their culture. They desired a partner who was religious, who possessed refinement and neatness, and who wanted a home and children, and they were strongly opposed to marrying someone who had been divorced. In sum, culture appears to be a very powerful correlate of mate preference (see Goodwin, 1999).

## ❖ CONTINUING DEBATES

Of the variety of topics in the human mating literature, very few have received the kind of sustained empirical attention that the topic of mate preference has received. As a result of scores of investigations, a good deal is now known about the attributes people say they prefer in their ideal romantic partners, yet two primary issues continue to plague researchers in this area.

### **Do We Always Get What We Want? The Issue of Compromise**

The first issue that must be addressed when interpreting research on mate preference concerns compromise. Most researchers interested in

exploring partner preferences focus on what people want—that is, on the characteristics or attributes they seek in potential, and often idealized, partners. However, one of the realities of human existence in general—and certainly of human mating—is that, to quote the Rolling Stones, “You can’t always get what you want.” In other words, although we might ideally want to date or marry someone with a particular set of features, we might not be able to attract someone with those attributes. Perhaps the desired partner is so attractive that he or she has many mating choices, and we are merely one among many possible options. Perhaps we simply do not meet the desired partner’s ideals. Maybe we are already paired with someone else and therefore not free to select a partner. Regardless of the reason, the bottom line is that we cannot always obtain the kind of partner we ideally desire. And so we must compromise.

The ability to make compromises in the arena of sex, love, and mating is extremely important. For example, if most people were completely unwilling to deviate from their ideal standards—if they absolutely refused to consider less than perfect partners and to enter into less than ideal mating relationships—little actual mating would take place; instead, everyone would be stuck in mating limbo waiting for that “perfect someone” to come along. Because a great deal of mating does occur, it is obvious that some degree of compromise must characterize the process of mate selection. Recognizing this, a few researchers have begun to explore when and how people make those compromises.

One of the first studies that provided evidence for the fact that people can and do alter their mating standards was conducted by psychologist James Pennebaker and his colleagues (1979). This creative field study took place over a 3-hour period in a number of bars and taverns located near a college campus. Specifically, at three preselected times—9:00 p.m., 10:30 p.m., and midnight (half an hour before closing)—the researchers entered the various establishments and asked a sample of randomly selected men and women to indicate how attractive they found the other bar patrons present at each of those times. Participants evaluated both same-sex and opposite-sex patrons. The researchers’ results indicated that as closing time neared, the perceived attractiveness of opposite-sex (but not same-sex) bar patrons increased significantly. In other words, the men got handsomer (according to the women) and the women got prettier (according to the men) as closing time approached. Assuming that the bar patrons actually did not alter their appearances over the course of the evening, and assuming that one goal of the participants was to select a potential mate from the

existing pool, these results suggest that men's and women's mating standards are not set in stone but rather are actually quite flexible. When we think we are running out of time to select a mate, the available alternatives become more attractive.

Researchers have also found evidence that people moderate their mate preferences to take into account their own desirability or *mate value*. For example, in one study, Regan (1998d) asked a group of men and women to identify how much intelligence, attractiveness, humor, and so on they desired in a perfect romantic partner and then to estimate how much of each attribute they themselves possessed. She found a strong and positive correlation between ideal preferences and mate value. For example, women who thought that they possessed high levels of attributes related to intellect, interpersonal skill and responsiveness, and social status demanded equally high levels of these desirable attributes from their potential partner, whereas women who believed they had lower levels of those characteristics expected correspondingly lower levels from their potential partner. Similarly, men who possessed a strong family orientation (e.g., desire for children and related "hearth and home" attributes) preferred a long-term partner with the same high level of these characteristics. In addition, the greater a man estimated his own social status to be, the less willing he was to compromise on that dimension with respect to a potential romantic partner.

Similar results were obtained more recently by Carrie Bredow, Ted Huston, and Norval Glenn (2011). In their investigation, a large sample of unmarried men and women rated themselves on six attribute dimensions: warmth and communality, responsibility and impulse control, expressiveness, human capital and resources, emotional stability, and physical attractiveness and health (these ratings were summed to yield a measure of each participant's "perceived market value"). Participants also (1) indicated the extent to which their potential mates (defined as other people "who were potentially available for a romantic relationship") possessed a variety of positive internal and external characteristics adapted from other mate preference research (e.g., kind and understanding, unselfish, follows through on commitments, good looking, handles money responsibly); (2) indicated how important it was for their future spouse to possess those attributes; and (3) estimated their own chances of actually securing a suitable partner (i.e., one with those essential qualities). The results revealed that participants' perceived market value was positively associated with the other three measures; that is, the higher a man's or a woman's perceived mate value, the greater the perceived quality of his or her potential



mates, the higher his or her standards for a future spouse, and the greater his or her confidence about marrying someone with those desirable attributes. Thus, people's own mate value is linked with their romantic preferences and mating expectations.

There is also evidence that people are sometimes willing to compromise in another way—specifically, by allowing their partners to score lower on attribute dimensions that they themselves possess in abundance (perhaps because they reason that if they have sufficient levels, there is less need for the partner to bring those features to the relationship). An interesting study conducted by Christine Stanik and Phoebe Ellsworth (2010) illustrates this phenomenon. Here, a large sample of college women were given a standard intelligence test and then asked to rate how much they desired the attributes “good financial prospect,” “social status,” and “ambition/industriousness” in a future spouse (these three items were summed to create an overall index of the partner's ability to provide). The results revealed a strong negative correlation between intelligence scores and preferences for this partner attribute. Specifically, the higher a woman's intelligence score was, the *less* she desired traits associated with the ability to provide financial resources. The authors conclude that women (and, presumably, men) with high levels of intelligence or other attributes have fewer constraints on their mating decisions and can be more flexible when considering potential partners:

Our data suggest that for women with access to education and career opportunities, intelligence makes a difference in what they look for in a man. As college women's intelligence increases, their reported desire for traits in a long-term partner that are associated with ability to provide decreases. This may reflect women's flexibility in prioritizing traits in a partner when a man's resources need not be of the utmost importance. (p. 214)

The fact that people seem to link their expectations to their own mate value provides support for the social exchange theories discussed earlier in the chapter as well as additional evidence for the important role played by compromise in mate selection.

People also appear willing to moderate their preferences by making “trade-offs” among various sets of features. For example, Cunningham and colleagues (1997) found that both men and women selected partners who combined physical attractiveness with a pleasing personality over partners who possessed the combination of physical attractiveness and wealth or the combination of a pleasing personality and wealth. Similarly, Lauri Jensen-Campbell, William Graziano, and

Stephen West (1995) reported that women preferred as dates men who possessed high levels of both agentic (e.g., active, assertive, bold, talkative) and agreeable (e.g., considerate, cooperative, kind, sympathetic) features over men who were agentic and disagreeable, nonagentic and agreeable, or nonagentic and disagreeable. And in a more recent study, Joanna Scheib (2001) found that women asked to imagine that they were selecting a husband overwhelmingly chose a less physically attractive man with a good character (e.g., dependable, faithful, kind and understanding, mature, patient) over a more attractive man with a less desirable character.

In sum, research indicates that men and women are willing to compromise their ideal mate standards by paying attention to external factors (e.g., selection time) that affect mate choice, by taking into account their own mate value, and by selectively choosing one characteristic or combination of characteristics over others.

### **Do We Always Know What We Want? The Issues of Self-Report and Hypothetical Ideals**

The second issue that plagues research in this area concerns whether the self-report methodologies and hypothetical “rate your ideal partner” scenarios that most researchers use adequately capture people’s real-life mate preferences. There is growing evidence, in fact, that these methodologies may contribute to a misleading view of men’s and women’s mating desires. For example, sex differences are greater in self-report paradigms than they are in behavioral research paradigms, and greater when participants are evaluating hypothetical as opposed to actual partners (see Eastwick & Finkel, 2008; for a review, see Feingold, 1990). Paul Eastwick and his colleagues (Eastwick, Luchies, Finkel, & Hunt, 2014) reviewed 95 articles that examined preferences for physical attractiveness and earning potential in real-life encounters (that is, studies in which participants evaluated romantic partners they were married to, dating, or had at least met face-to-face). The authors’ analyses revealed that, unlike in studies where people rate hypothetical dates or spouses, there were no sex differences with respect to preferences for these two attribute dimensions in the “real world.” Across all studies, the higher a real partner’s physical attractiveness and earning potential, the more positively both men and women evaluated him or her. In other words, the factors that people pay attention to and value in real-life mates do not necessarily match the ones they focus on when reporting their ideal, hypothetical preferences.

A study conducted by Sprecher (1989) provides an early and compelling illustration of this phenomenon. In her investigation, men and women received information about an opposite-sex target who was presented as possessing high or low levels of three attributes: physical attractiveness, earning potential, and expressiveness. After rating the target's desirability as a dating partner, participants then were asked to indicate which of these factors they believed had influenced their evaluations. Men reported being more influenced than women by the target's physical appearance. Recall that this is the first of the two major sex differences commonly reported in the literature (i.e., men value physical attractiveness in potential romantic partners more than do women). However, the experimental data revealed that men and women were equally affected by the manipulation. That is, the physically attractive target was overwhelmingly preferred as a dating partner by both men and women. Similarly, women believed more than did men that their evaluations had been affected by the target's earning potential. This is the second major sex difference often found in the literature (i.e., women value social status and resource attributes in potential mates more than do men). As before, however, there was no actual sex difference in the impact of that variable on perceptions of the target; men and women were equally affected by the target's earning potential. These results suggest that men and women may be differentially aware of (or motivated to reveal) the factors that influence their perceptions and evaluations of potential mates—an important consideration to keep in mind when evaluating research on partner preferences.

### Summary

---

The preferences and choices that men and women demonstrate as they enter, maintain, and terminate mating relationships undoubtedly are influenced by both contemporary and distal mechanisms. As was predicted from both of the theoretical frameworks we reviewed, men and women generally prefer partners who possess a constellation of positive characteristics, ranging from internal or dispositional traits (e.g., emotional stability, humor, intelligence), to interpersonal attributes (e.g., friendliness, sociability), to physical features (e.g., attractiveness), to social variables (e.g., status). In addition, they seek to avoid certain particularly repellant features, and they seem willing to modify their preferences as a function of various factors, including their own mate value. In Chapter 2, we turn to a consideration of the ways in which people go about fulfilling their desires and obtaining the type of mate they seek.

## Key Concepts

---

Social context frameworks (p. 4)	Emotional fitness (p. 7)
Social exchange or equity models (p. 4)	Physical or genetic fitness (p. 7)
Social role theory (p. 5)	Relational fitness (p. 8)
Social and cultural scripts (p. 5)	Social fitness (p. 8)
Social learning processes (p. 5)	Parental investment-based models (p. 8)
Sexual regimes (p. 5)	Self-report methodologies (p. 9)
Evolutionary models (p. 6)	Social allergens (p. 13)
Adaptive problems (p. 6)	Mate value (p. 17)

## Discussion Questions

---

1. In what ways does the process of mate selection resemble a “social marketplace”? Do we always pay attention to our own and our potential partners’ “bargaining power”?
2. How do social roles, sociocultural scripts, social learning processes, and sexual regimes contribute to mating behavior? Consider how these factors might explain sex differences and cultural differences in partner preferences.
3. Consider how various attributes (e.g., emotional fitness, physical vitality, resources and status) may have contributed to personal survival and reproductive success in the ancestral environment.
4. Compare and contrast the various methodologies available for examining mate preferences. Which one do you think provides the most accurate view of people’s desires? Which one provides the least accurate view?
5. Consider what is known about men’s and women’s mate preferences. How does the empirical evidence support or contradict the social context and evolutionary theories reviewed in the first part of the chapter?
6. Collect a sample of personal ads. What do people seek in a potential partner? What do they advertise? Make a list. Are there any similarities among your sample of writers? How do the preferences contained in the ads compare with research from self-report studies of mate preference?
7. Think about your own dating experiences. Have you ever compromised when considering someone as a potential romantic partner? What characteristics do you personally feel are absolutely essential in a long-term partner (i.e., you would not be willing to compromise)? What attributes are luxuries (you desire them, but they are not absolutely essential)? In answering this question, it might be helpful to look at the list of attributes in Tables 1.1 and 1.2.

## Recommended Readings

These articles present theories that can be applied to human mate preferences and that have been used to explain sex differences in mating behavior. The first article focuses on social role theory, the second presents social learning theory, the third reviews a number of social context and evolutionary theories, and the fourth presents an overview of social exchange models.

- Eagly, A. H., Wood, W., & Johannesen-Schmidt, M. (2004). Social role theory of sex differences and similarities: Implications for partner preferences of women and men. In A. H. Eagly, A. Beall, & R. J. Sternberg (Eds.), *The psychology of gender* (2nd ed., pp. 269–295). New York, NY: Guilford Press.
- Hogben, M., & Byrne, D. (1998). Using social learning theory to explain individual differences in human sexuality. *The Journal of Sex Research, 35*, 58–71.
- Oliver, M. B., & Hyde, J. S. (1993). Gender differences in sexuality: A meta-analysis. *Psychological Bulletin, 114*, 29–51.
- Sprecher, S. (1998). Social exchange theories and sexuality. *The Journal of Sex Research, 35*, 32–43.

The authors of these articles use different methodological approaches to investigate mate preferences.

- Deaux, K., & Hanna, R. (1984). Courtship in the personals column: The influence of gender and sexual orientation. *Sex Roles, 11*, 363–375.
- Jensen-Campbell, L. A., Graziano, W. G., & West, S. (1995). Dominance, prosocial orientation, and female preferences: Do nice guys really finish last? *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 68*, 427–440.
- Kenrick, D. T., Groth, G. E., Trost, M. R., & Sadalla, E. K. (1993). Integrating evolutionary and social exchange perspectives on relationships: Effects of gender, self-appraisal, and involvement level on mate selection criteria. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 64*, 951–969.
- Li, N. P., Bailey, J. M., Kenrick, D. T., & Linsenmeier, J. A. W. (2002). The necessities and luxuries of mate preferences: Testing the trade-offs. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 82*, 947–955.
- Regan, P. C., & Berscheid, E. (1997). Gender differences in characteristics desired in a potential sexual and marriage partner. *Journal of Psychology and Human Sexuality, 9*, 25–37.
- Wiederman, M. W., & Allgeier, E. R. (1992). Gender differences in mate selection criteria: Sociobiological or socioeconomic explanation? *Ethology and Sociobiology, 13*, 115–124.

The first of these two important meta-analyses reveals that people's stated preferences for potential romantic partners do not always predict their actual mating choices (in other words, just because people say they value particular qualities in a mate does not necessarily mean that they will actually pursue a relationship with someone who possesses those desired qualities). The second

analysis reveals that physical attractiveness is as important a social asset for men to possess as it is for women to possess. In this paper, the authors argue that theories emphasizing sex differences (e.g., parental investment-based evolutionary frameworks) may be less accurate than others in explaining the social impact of physical attractiveness.

Eastwick, P. W., Luchies, L. B., Finkel, E. J., & Hunt, L. L. (2014). The predictive validity of ideal partner preferences: A review and meta-analysis. *Psychological Bulletin*, *140*, 623–665.

Langlois, J. H., Kalakanis, L., Rubenstein, A. J., Larson, A., Hallam, M., & Smoot, M. (2000). Maxims or myths of beauty? A meta-analytic and theoretical review. *Psychological Bulletin*, *126*, 390–423.

Do not copy, post, or distribute