

Characteristics of the Ideal Sex Partner: Gender Differences and Perceptions of the Preferences of the Other Gender

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The objective of the current study was to further examine gender differences in preferences for particular characteristics in a sexual partner and to investigate the extent to which men and women accurately estimate the preferences of the other gender. Heterosexual college students (185 men, 244 women) rated a diverse set of characteristics in a hypothetical sexual partner with whom they were presumed to be involved in an ongoing relationship. Participants also responded to the same set of items with regard to estimates of the ratings of the other gender (order of presentation was counter-balanced). Although there was notable similarity in what men and women most valued in a potential long-term sex partner, there were gender differences with regard to ratings of several of the items. Also, men and women under- or overestimated the ratings of the other gender with regard to several characteristics. Results are discussed with regard to implications for intervention as well as directions for future research.

What makes for the ideal sex partner? Are there gender differences in these desired characteristics? How accurately do men and women perceive the preferences of the other gender? These are questions for which we have little empirical data. Much research has been conducted on men's and women's reported preferences regarding long-term mates (Allgeier & Wiederman, 1994; Buss, 1994; Wiederman & Allgeier, 1994). However, research on preferences in sexual partners has been relatively scarce.

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Hatfield, Sprecher, Pillemer, Greenberger, and Wexler (1989) had undergraduates rate several characteristics and activities as to whether the respondent would prefer his or her partner to exhibit each of them more or less than the partner currently does during their sexual interaction. With only one exception (talk more lovingly), there were no gender differences with regard to the characteristics and activities related to love and intimacy (e.g., be more caring, considerate, complimentary, warm, involved, and seductive). However, there were gender differences on several of the items related to partner initiative and sexual variety. In each case, men indicated more than did women that they wished that their partners would exhibit more frequently such characteristics or activities. These included being rough, dominant, experimental, variable, and impulsive during sex as well as taking the initiative more and providing more instructions.

Similar to Hatfield and colleagues, Purnine, Carey, and Jorgensen (1994) asked college students to respond to several items having to do with preferences for characteristics and activities related to one's sexual partner. There were many notable gender differences including men's greater preference for use of alcohol, drugs, and erotica with a partner as well as men's greater interest in oral sex. In contrast, women demonstrated greater preference than did men for emotionally intimate, romantic settings, as well as nongenital forms of sexual expression and stimulation. Denny, Field, and Quadagno (1984) also found that with regard to sexual interaction, male undergraduates placed the most emphasis on intercourse, whereas female undergraduates most valued foreplay.

These few studies that have compared men's and women's preferences for sexual partners have been fairly consistent in finding that men place relatively greater emphasis on genital stimulation and desire partners who exhibit greater initiative and erotophilia. Compared to men, women may desire more nongenital expressions of affection as well as romantic settings for sexual activity. The extent to which men and women accurately perceive the preferences of the other gender is a question not explored in previous research.

The purpose of the current study was to further examine gender differences in a varied set of characteristics in a sexual partner (within the presumed context of an ongoing relationship) and to investigate the extent to which men and women accurately estimate the preferences of the other gender. This latter aspect of the current study may have important implications for sexual counseling and education; inaccuracy in assessing the other gender may lead to confusion, frustration, self-imposed pressure, and unsatisfying sexual interactions between men and women.

METHOD

Participants

Initially, participants were 207 men and 267 women enrolled in introductory psychology courses at a mid-sized Midwestern university. Each student re-

ceived partial credit toward completion of the research participation requirement of the course. Of the initial participants, 5 men and 9 women indicated a primary or exclusive attraction toward members of the same gender. As the focus of the current study was heterosexual preferences, these few participants were excluded from further consideration. Additionally, those relatively few participants who were younger than 18 years ($n = 6$) or older than 22 years ($n = 25$) were excluded. The final sample then consisted of 185 heterosexual men and heterosexual women who ranged in age from 18 to 22 years ($M = 18.66$, $SD = .98$), with 84.8% of these participants being either 18 or 19 years of age. The large majority of participants (89.0%) were Caucasian.

Measures

After providing demographic information and indicating sexual orientation, respondents were asked to complete measures of their own preferences for a sex partner as well as perceptions of how members of the other gender would rate such characteristics. The ratings for self were introduced with the following: "Below is a list of characteristics you may or may not find desirable in an ideal sex partner in the context of a long-term relationship. Consider the extent to which you would like your long-term sex partner to display each characteristic, and use the following scale to indicate your degree of agreement or disagreement." Respondents were provided with a 6-point scale (1 = *Strongly Disagree*, 2 = *Disagree*, 3 = *Slightly Disagree*, 4 = *Slightly Agree*, 5 = *Agree*, 6 = *Strongly Agree*). The partner characteristics started with the stem "For me, an ideal sex partner would . . ." The 10 specific characteristics are listed in Table 1.

With regard to perceptions of preferences among members of the other gender, the task was introduced with separate instructions for men and women respondents. For illustration, the men's instructions were as follows: "Below is a list of characteristics you may or may not believe a *woman* finds desir-

TABLE 1. Comparison of Men ($n = 185$) and Women ($n = 244$) with Regard to Rated Importance of Particular Characteristics in Long-Term Sex Partners

Partner Characteristic	Men Mean (SD)	Women Mean (SD)	F (1,427)	$p <$	d
1. Be open to discussing sex	5.19 (.86)	5.50 (.75)	15.82	.0001	.38
2. Be uninhibited	4.36 (1.19)	4.37 (1.12)	.02	.89	.02
3. Be physically attractive	5.21 (.82)	4.75 (.91)	29.88	.0001	.51
4. Be knowledgeable about sex	5.01 (.91)	5.21 (.85)	5.66	.02	.23
5. Pay me compliments during sex	4.41 (1.09)	4.72 (1.00)	9.59	.002	.29
6. Clearly communicate desires	5.10 (.91)	5.11 (.73)	.00	.98	.01
7. Be easily sexually aroused	4.59 (1.07)	4.57 (1.01)	.04	.85	.02
8. Experience orgasm easily	4.32 (1.01)	3.73 (1.19)	29.57	.0001	.51
9. Like erotic videos, books, magazines	3.48 (1.32)	3.08 (1.35)	9.36	.003	.30
10. Take the dominant role during sex	3.91 (.99)	4.19 (1.01)	8.24	.005	.28

able in an ideal sex partner in the context of a long-term relationship. Consider the extent to which you think a woman would like her long-term sex partner to display each characteristic and use the following scale to indicate your degree of agreement or disagreement.” The same 6-point scale was provided. The item stem was “For a woman about my age, an ideal sex partner would . . .” The same 10 partner characteristics were presented for self as well as men’s and women’s estimates of preferences held by the other gender. The order of presentation of the self versus other gender rating task was counterbalanced to avoid effects of rating one’s own preferences prior or subsequent to estimating the preferences of members of the other gender.

PROCEDURE

All participants were recruited through the established introductory psychology subject pool using standard procedures. As is the case with all studies conducted using the subject pool, potential participants were unaware of the nature of the study at initial sign-up. Students learned of the nature of the research task upon arrival at the testing site. None of the students declined to participate, although that option was explicitly provided in the introduction to the study. Respondents completed the anonymous questionnaire in mixed-gender groups of 5–20 participants. These groups were conducted by either a male or female research assistant of approximately the same age as the participants. Before responding to the questionnaire, participants were provided with a blank sheet of paper and asked to describe “the ideal sex partner.” The purpose of this task was to prime respondents to consider, in their opinion, what characteristics were most important. The resulting descriptions were not used in the current study. Upon completion of the questionnaire, respondents placed them in a large box several feet from the researcher, were thanked, and received a credit slip noting participation in the study.

RESULTS

We conducted three sets of ten analyses. In the first, we compared men’s and women’s ratings of the importance of each of the characteristics in a long-term sex partner. Next, we compared women’s ratings of men’s preferences to men’s actual ratings. Last, we compared men’s ratings of women’s preferences to women’s actual ratings. To reduce the likelihood of capitalizing on chance with such a relatively large number of analyses, we corrected the effective p value for each set of analyses using the standard Bonferroni correction. In other words, to maintain a family-wise p value of .05, differences were deemed statistically significant if the p value was .005 or less (i.e., .05/10) for any single analysis. Additionally, we report indices of effect size (d) for each comparison. Cohen (1969) considered d values around .20 to be

indicative of small effects, values around .50 to be indicative of medium effects, and values of .80 or greater as indicating large effects.

Comparisons of men's and women's ratings of importance for each of the partner characteristics are reported in Table 1. Note that there were statistically significant gender differences with regard to six of the ten characteristics. Relative to women, men valued more highly a sex partner who is physically attractive, attains orgasm easily, and likes erotic media. Considering the mean ratings for each gender on each of these items, *both* men and women preferred a physically attractive sex partner, but men more so. Men preferred a partner who easily attains orgasm, whereas women disagreed that this was a preferred characteristic in a sex partner. Both men and women disagreed that an ideal partner would like erotic media, only women disagreed more. With regard to the remaining items demonstrating gender differences, women more highly valued a partner who is open to discussing sex, offers compliments during sex, and takes the dominant role. For all three of these items, *both* men and women agreed that they were desirable characteristics in a sex partner; however, women rated them higher.

Table 2 contains the results of comparisons between men's reported preferences and women's ratings regarding what they thought men prefer. Note that there were inaccuracies with regard to six of the ten items. Specifically, women underestimated men's preference for a partner who is open to discussing sex and clearly communicates her desires. Conversely, women overestimated men's preference for a partner who offers compliments during sex, is easily sexually aroused, attains orgasm easily, and likes erotic media. In most of these instances, men and women agreed that men view these characteristics positively, but women simply misjudged the extent to which these were deemed positive characteristics. The one exception was the item having to do with erotic media. Men slightly disagreed that an ideal sex partner likes erotic media, whereas women slightly agreed that men prefer a sex partner who likes erotic media.

TABLE 2. Comparison of Men's ($n = 185$) Self-Reported Preferences for Particular Characteristics in Long-Term Sex Partners and Women's ($n = 244$) Estimates of Male Preferences

Partner Characteristic	Men's Actual		Women's Estimates		F (1,427)	$p <$	d
	Mean	(SD)	Mean	(SD)			
1. Be open to discussing sex	5.19	(.86)	4.84	(1.05)	13.75	.001	.35
2. Be uninhibited	4.36	(1.19)	4.45	(1.21)	.70	.41	.08
3. Be physically attractive	5.21	(.82)	5.36	(.70)	4.38	.04	.20
4. Be knowledgeable about sex	5.01	(.91)	4.85	(.96)	2.78	.10	.16
5. Pay me compliments during sex	4.41	(1.09)	5.06	(.92)	45.33	.0001	.62
6. Clearly communicate desires	5.10	(.91)	4.86	(.89)	7.89	.005	.26
7. Be easily sexually aroused	4.59	(1.07)	4.98	(.95)	16.23	.0001	.39
8. Experience orgasm easily	4.32	(1.01)	4.60	(1.10)	7.01	.005	.26
9. Like erotic videos, books, magazines	3.48	(1.32)	4.22	(1.35)	31.96	.0001	.53
10. Take the dominant role during sex	3.91	(.99)	3.98	(1.16)	.45	.51	.06

Table 3 contains the results of comparisons between women's reported preferences and men's ratings regarding what they thought women prefer. Note that there were inaccuracies with regard to three of the ten items. Specifically, men underestimated women's preference for a partner who is open to discussing sex and clearly communicates his desires and overestimated the degree to which women dislike a sex partner who attains orgasm easily.

DISCUSSION

Considering the mean ratings in Table 1, both men and women rated eight of the ten characteristics as generally positive in a long-term sexual partner. The exceptions were that men slightly disagreed that an ideal partner would like erotic media and would take the dominant role during sex. Women slightly disagreed that an ideal sex partner would like erotic media and would attain orgasm easily. Despite a high degree of overall agreement as to the general positive nature of most of the partner characteristics, there were several gender differences with regard to how highly each was rated. Compared to the other gender, men placed relatively more value on a sexual partner who is physically attractive, experiences orgasm easily, and likes erotic media, whereas women placed relatively more value on a sexual partner who is open to discussing sex, provides compliments during sex, and takes the dominant role during sex.

The findings that perhaps have the greatest implications for intervention are those reported in Tables 2 and 3. In comparing the perceptions of the other gender with the actual ratings from each gender, several misperceptions were apparent. First, both men and women underestimated the value that the other gender places on a partner who is open to discussing sex and who clearly communicates desires. Yet for both men and women these character-

TABLE 3. Comparison of Women's ($n = 244$) Self-Reported Preferences for Particular Characteristics in Long-Term Sex Partners and Men's ($n = 184$) Estimates of Female Preferences

Partner Characteristic	Men's Estimates Mean (<i>SD</i>)	Women's Actual Mean (<i>SD</i>)	<i>F</i> (1,426)	<i>p</i> <	<i>d</i>
1. Be open to discussing sex	4.95 (.93)	5.50 (.75)	46.24	.0001	.63
2. Be uninhibited	4.11 (1.14)	4.37 (1.12)	5.51	.02	.23
3. Be physically attractive	4.96 (.93)	4.75 (.91)	5.81	.02	.23
4. Be knowledgeable about sex	5.05 (.85)	5.21 (.85)	3.71	.06	.19
5. Pay me compliments during sex	4.77 (.95)	4.72 (1.00)	.27	.61	.05
6. Clearly communicate desires	4.83 (.95)	5.11 (.73)	11.40	.001	.33
7. Be easily sexually aroused	4.32 (1.15)	4.57 (1.01)	5.63	.02	.23
8. Experience orgasm easily	3.33 (1.01)	3.73 (1.19)	9.97	.002	.30
9. Like erotic videos, books, magazines	3.06 (1.25)	3.08 (1.35)	.02	.90	.01
10. Take the dominant role during sex	4.24 (1.06)	4.19 (1.01)	.31	.58	.05

istics were among the most highly rated. To the extent that members of each gender misperceive the high value members of the other gender place on communication by a sexual partner, individuals are liable to refrain from such communication. Acting on these misperceptions may result in an increased likelihood of unsatisfying sexual interactions as well as negative consequences that can result from sexual situations lacking in partner communication such as sexually transmitted diseases, sexual coercion, and hurt feelings.

The other apparent misperceptions may place both men and women at risk of self-imposed pressure to perform to a certain standard when involved in a sexual interaction. Specifically, women overestimated men's preference for a sexual partner who likes erotic media and easily becomes aroused and attains orgasm. Men overestimated women's dislike for a sexual partner who attains orgasm easily. This set of misperceptions may result in men and women being their own worst critics of sexual performance. Women may believe that they are not erotophilic enough and do not respond physically to sexual stimuli as their partner would like, whereas men may believe that they do not refrain long enough from ejaculating to meet their partners' expectations.

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