

Rethinking what men and women want in a partner

February 13 2008

When it comes to romantic attraction men primarily are motivated by good looks and women by earning power. At least that's what men and women have been saying for a long time. Based on research that dates back several decades, the widely accepted notion permeates popular culture today.

But those sex differences didn't hold up in a new in-depth study of romantic attraction undertaken by two Northwestern University psychologists.

In short, the data suggest that whether you're a man or a woman, being attractive is just as good for your romantic prospects and, to a lesser extent, so is being a good earner.

“Sex Differences in Mate Preferences Revisited: Do People Know What They Initially Desire in a Romantic Partner?” was published in the February issue of the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*.

For a month, the romantic lives of study participants were scrutinized, including their prospects within and outside of a speed-dating event.

What people said and did in choosing romantic partners were two different matters.

“True to the stereotypes, the initial self-reports of male participants indicated that they cared more than women about a romantic partner's

physical attractiveness, and the women in the study stated more than men that earning power was an aphrodisiac,” said Paul Eastwick, lead author of the study and graduate student in psychology in the Weinberg School of Arts and Sciences at Northwestern.

But in reality men and women were equally inspired by physical attraction and equally inspired by earning power or ambition.

“In other words good looks was the primary stimulus of attraction for both men and women, and a person with good earning prospects or ambition tended to be liked as well,” said Eli Finkel, assistant professor of psychology at Northwestern. “Most noteworthy, the earning-power effect as well as the good-looks effect didn’t differ for men and women.”

Participants’ preferences based on their live romantic interactions contrasted with the ideal sex-differentiated preferences that they reported 10 days before the speed-dating event.

“We found that the romantic dynamics that occurred at the speed-dating event and during the following 30-day period had little to do with the sex-differentiated preferences stated on the questionnaires,” said Finkel.

The speed dating methodology gave the researchers an opportunity not available to earlier generations of researchers to compare stated romantic preferences with actual choices participants made about a series of potential partners.

The discrepancy between what people did and said in this dating situation fits with other research that shows that people often do a poor job explaining why they do things, often referring to accepted cultural theories to explain their own behavior.

The speed-dating methodology allowed the Northwestern researchers to

move beyond the abstract world of romantic ideals to see how people actually rated a number of flesh-and-blood people regarding physical attractiveness, ambition and earning power.

“If you were to tell me that you prefer physically attractive romantic partners, I would expect to see that you indeed are more attracted to physically attractive partners,” said Eastwick. “But our participants didn’t pursue their ideal in this way. This leads us to question whether people know what they initially value in a romantic partner.”

What about the academic argument that men are primed much more than women to highly value beauty in romantic partners in an evolutionary quest for health, fertility and preservation of the gene pool" The new Northwestern research poses at least as many questions as it answers about the differences between the sexes. Is it possible after all that, when it comes to romantic attraction, men aren’t from Mars and women aren’t from Venus" The new study suggests that both sexes have similar romantic responses to each other right here on planet Earth.

Source: Northwestern University

Citation: Rethinking what men and women want in a partner (2008, February 13) retrieved 27 April 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2008-02-rethinking-men-women-partner.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.