

Review of research calls into question sex differences in face-to-face mate preferences

June 19 2013

Women say they place a priority on a potential partner's earning prospects, and men claim to value a potential partner's physical attractiveness; these sex differences have been widely studied by psychologists for decades.

A recently published meta-analysis conducted by researchers at The University of Texas at Austin indicates that these differences may be more fragile than previously thought. Specifically, men and women do not differ in how much they desire physical attractiveness and earning prospects in real life, opposite-[sex partners](#).

The meta-analysis, led by Paul Eastwick, was published recently in *Psychological Bulletin*.

The researchers examined published studies and, in some cases, unpublished data that measured the association between either physical attractiveness or earning prospects and romantic evaluations. They reviewed more than 12,000 published studies on [mate selection](#) and [romantic relationships](#), locating 95 relevant studies from 15 countries.

"These data have been out there for many years, but a new approach to the data is looking at whether these [sex differences](#) emerged in actual relationships. We turned to our fellow researchers who went through their [computer files](#) and drawers to rediscover this data," says Eastwick, assistant professor of human development and family sciences.

Analysis of relevant studies indicates that although physical attractiveness does inspire positive romantic evaluations, this effect was just as strong for men as for women. Earning prospects had weaker effects than physical attractiveness, but again, it was just as strong for men and women.

"When people are considering [potential partners](#) they have never met—online dating profiles, for example—[physical attractiveness](#) definitely matters more for men than for women," says Eastwick. "Our meta-analysis shows that this sex difference completely evaporates once people have interacted face-to-face."

The meta-analysis covered attraction studies, such as speed-dating, where people think about whether they would want to date another person. It also covered studies in which people report their feelings about their current romantic partners.

There were no sex differences in the effects of attractiveness or earning prospects in either type of study.

These sex differences are foundational concepts in evolutionary psychology. Eastwick suggested that the hypothetical scenarios often used to document sex differences could lead to conclusions that do not apply to the real lives of most people.

"The data do not impugn evolutionary approaches to an understanding of relationship processes. But the data do indicate that sex differences look very different depending on whether you examine what appeals to people in the abstract or what qualities they find appealing in a real partner they have met face-to-face." Eastwick says.

Provided by University of Texas at Austin

Citation: Review of research calls into question sex differences in face-to-face mate preferences (2013, June 19) retrieved 20 April 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2013-06-sex-differences-face-to-face.html>

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