

Why do men prefer nice women?

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People's emotional reactions and desires in initial romantic encounters determine the fate of a potential relationship. Responsiveness may be one of those initial "sparks" necessary to fuel sexual desire and land a second date. However, it may not be a desirable trait for both men and women on a first date. Does responsiveness increase sexual desire in the other person? Do men perceive responsive women as more attractive, and does the same hold true for women's perceptions of men? A study published in *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* seeks to answer those questions.

Femininity and Attractiveness

Researchers from the Interdisciplinary Center (IDC) Herzliya, the University of Rochester, and the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, collaborated on three studies to observe people's perceptions of responsiveness. People often say that they seek a partner that is "responsive to their needs," and that such a partner would arouse their sexual interest. A responsive person is one that is supportive of another's needs and goals. "Sexual desire thrives on rising intimacy and being responsive is one of the best ways to instill this elusive sensation over time," lead researcher Gurit Birnbaum explains. "Our findings show that this does not necessarily hold true in an initial encounter, because a responsive potential partner may convey opposite meanings to different people."

In the first study, the researchers examined whether responsiveness is perceived as feminine or masculine, and whether men or women

perceived a responsive person of the opposite sex as sexually desirable. Men who perceived female partners as more responsive also perceived them as more feminine, and more attractive. However, the association between responsiveness and male partner's masculinity was not significant for women. Women's perceptions of partner responsiveness were marginally and negatively associated with perceptions of partner attractiveness.

Sparkling Sexual Desire

Participants in the second study were asked to interact with a responsive or non-responsive individual of the opposite sex, and view that individual's photo (the same photo was given to each participant). They were then asked to interact online with this individual, and discuss details on a current problem in their life. The responsiveness of the virtual individual was manipulated, for example, "You must have gone through a very difficult time" as a responsive reply, versus "Doesn't sound so bad to me" as a non-responsive reply.

Men who interacted with a responsive female individual perceived her as more feminine and as more sexually attractive than did men in the unresponsive condition. Women are more cautious than men when interpreting a stranger's expressions of responsiveness, and their perceptions of the stranger, which were seemingly unaffected by perceived responsiveness, may reflect conflicting trends among different women. "Some women, for example, may interpret responsiveness negatively and feel uncomfortable about a new acquaintance who seems to want to be close. Such feelings may impair sexual attraction to this responsive stranger. Other women may perceive a responsive stranger as warm and caring and therefore as a desirable long-term partner," Dr. Birnbaum elaborates.

The third and final study tested the possibility that responsiveness may

activate motivational mechanisms for men that fuel pursuit of either short-term or long-term sexual relationship opportunities. A female partner's actual responsiveness led men to perceive her as more feminine, and consequently to feel more sexually aroused. Heightened sexual arousal, in turn, was linked to both increased perception of partner attractiveness and greater desire for a long-term relationship with that partner.

Women's Perceptions of Responsiveness

The findings of the study imply that whether a responsive partner will be seen as sexually desirable or not depends on the context and meaning assigned to responsiveness. In early dating, the meaning of responsiveness is likely shaped by gender-specific expectations. Women did not perceive a responsive man as less masculine, but even so, women did not find a responsive man as more attractive. The study helps to explain why men find responsive women sexually attractive, but does not reveal the mechanism that underlies women's desire for new acquaintanceships.

"We still do not know why women are less sexually attracted to responsive strangers; it may not necessarily have to do with 'being nice.' Women may perceive a responsive stranger as less desirable for different reasons," Prof. Birnbaum cautions. "Women may perceive this person as inappropriately nice and manipulative (i.e., trying to obtain sexual favors) or eager to please, perhaps even as desperate, and therefore less sexually appealing. Alternatively, [women](#) may perceive a responsive man as vulnerable and less dominant. Regardless of the reasons, perhaps men should slow down if their goal is to instill [sexual desire](#)."

More information: Why do Men Prefer Nice Women? Gender Typicality Mediates the Effect of Responsiveness on Perceived Attractiveness in Initial Acquaintances. *Personality and Social*

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