

# Your brain may be what interests that guy checking you out

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Brains over beauty? But we all know that guys are hardwired for pretty faces and shapely bodies when it comes to choosing a mate, right?

Not so fast. Despite today's ongoing challenges in achieving gender equality, a new review of research on [mate preferences](#) conducted by researchers at Northwestern University and the University of Innsbruck suggests that modern [men](#) indeed increasingly value brains over beauty in their long-term partners.

"Our review across several disciplines suggest that mating preferences of men as well as women have responded with unsuspected speed to progress toward gender equality," said Marcel Zentner, professor of psychology at University of Innsbruck in Austria.

The common view is that our mate choices are evolutionarily "hardwired" in our brains and therefore minimally responsive to changing conditions. But some evolutionary scientists now argue that humans are programmed to respond with great flexibility to changing environments.

"This flexibility allows people to do what sociocultural theorists have maintained for a long time: Select partners who minimize the costs and maximize the benefits that they will experience in their future lives," said Alice Eagly, professor of psychology and faculty fellow at the Institute for Policy Research at Northwestern.

Indeed, she and her colleagues have shown that men and women who were led to envision a future as their family's sole provider preferred a partner with domestic skills. Conversely, women and men who projected a future as a stay-at-home parent preferred someone relatively older and thus established in a career.

Three interlocking sources of evidence support these conclusions. What makes Zentner and Eagly's study unique is their demonstrations across these differing types of research.

Cross-cultural research found that the more gender-egalitarian a country, the less likely that men and women trade male earning power for female youth and beauty—the pattern that many evolutionary psychologists believe to be innate. The greater preference of women for a high-earning partner is twice as large in gender-unequal nations such as Korea and Turkey than in more gender-equal nations such as Finland and the United States. Notably, in Finland men are more interested in an educated, intelligent partner than women are.

Then, Zentner and Eagly looked at individuals. Sex differences in what people want in a mate diminish not only when societies become more gender-egalitarian but also when individuals embrace more gender-equal attitudes. Men and women with traditional mindsets prefer partners that suit the old-style exchange of male breadwinning for female fertility and domestic skills. But those preferences have weakened considerably among people who favor gender equality.

Finally, what men and women want parallels changes in gender roles in recent history. The traditional world of female homemakers and male breadwinners is long gone in many nations. In the United States, 70 percent of mothers with children under 18 are in the labor force. In 38 percent of marriages with an employed wife, she earns more than he does. Not that long ago, women's education and income were only minor

assets for attracting a husband. Today, they matter. Of course, women have long sought these attributes in men. What's new is that men now choose wives in a similar way.

Gender equality appears to act as a lever. Wherever you push it up, differences between men's and women's partner preferences diminish. That doesn't mean that these differences will disappear entirely or that biology plays no role in mate preferences. However, social factors shape mate preferences much more strongly than has been assumed.

In the old days, it made sense for women to seek men who could provide for them and for men to seek women who could cook and clean while producing children. "In today's world, where both partners can (and often must) work to achieve a decent lifestyle, most men want an educated, intelligent wife who can earn a good wage," Eagly said. "In turn, men can worry somewhat less about producing wealth but may benefit from brushing up their looks and domestic skills."

The review, "A sociocultural framework for understanding partner preferences of [women](#) and men: integration of concepts and evidence," was published in January in the *European Review of Social Psychology*.

**More information:** Marcel Zentner et al. A sociocultural framework for understanding partner preferences of women and men: Integration of concepts and evidence, *European Review of Social Psychology* (2015). [DOI: 10.1080/10463283.2015.1111599](https://doi.org/10.1080/10463283.2015.1111599)

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