

Do men and women really look for different things in a romantic partner?

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Scientists demonstrate for first time that men, women mean what they say – guys care more about attractiveness, women care more about social status.

In the last few years, researchers examining "speed-dating" have been making a radical claim. Although men and [women](#) say they want something different in [romantic partners](#), the two sexes really want the same thing. But a new study demonstrates that the claim needs revisiting. Indeed, men and women really mean what they say – guys care a lot more about attractiveness and women care a lot more about [social status](#).

Published in this month's *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, the findings are the first to demonstrate experimentally that the sexes differ in the way they choose mates in real-life contexts.

The study's findings contradict recently popularized speed-dating studies that have found that, while men and women show these differences when considering hypothetical ideal partners, their preferences do not match up with how they actually evaluate and choose speed-dating partners. Both sexes seem to place equally high value on [physical attractiveness](#) in their speed-dates.

A recent review of [romantic relationship](#) studies has found a similar lack of consistency between stated and actual preferences. Have [sex differences](#) in mate preferences been a giant fib? Do people truly lack awareness of what they desire in a partner? A closer examination reveals a far more fascinating picture.

Norman Li, associate professor of psychology at Singapore Management University, Oliver Sng, a doctoral psychology student at Arizona State University, and colleagues conducted various experiments using online chatting and speed-[dating methods](#). Unlike past studies, these

experiments were explicitly set up to include men and women with low social status and low physical attractiveness.

After chatting with opposite-sex individuals with both low and moderate levels of these traits, men, more than women, rejected and reported less attraction toward potential mates with low physical attractiveness. Women, more than men, indicated similar aversion toward those with low social status. Also, how people valued these traits when asked about their preferences on paper predicted their attraction toward actual chat partners encountered live.

According to Li, the study's lead author, the research is also novel because the scientists are clarifying how exactly men and women differ.

"That is, they prioritize different qualities when screening each other in online chats and speed-dates – women want men who are at least average in social status while men want women who are at least moderately physically attractive," Li said. "We also are the first to demonstrate that what individuals say they value in potential mates is indeed reflected in how they actually choose them in initial mating situations."

According to Li, men and women differ mostly on the low-end qualities that they want to avoid, not the high-end traits that they ideally desire. However, unattractiveness in women and low social status in men may not be well-represented in speed-dating events and attraction studies run on university students and professionals; hence, a reason why other speed-dating studies have not found sex differences and why it might appear that people do not know what they want in their potential mates.

"Speed-dating events and other modern contexts have many factors that can prevent a person's ideal preferences from being expressed," said Sng. "This

new study identifies one such factor (lack of low-end variability) and shows that once you correct for it, people do indeed make choices closer to what they ideally want."

The new experimental findings are consistent with previous mate preference research conducted by Li and Douglas Kenrick, professor of psychology in ASU's College of Liberal Arts and Sciences, who found that men prioritize having moderate physical attractiveness, while women prioritize having moderate social status in a long-term mate.

Kenrick said, "The new study helps to dispel politically correct – but factually misguided – notions of a gender-neutral world where men and women want the exact same kind of mates."

Provided by Arizona State University

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