

## Mate Selection Preferences: Gender Differences Examined in a National Sample

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Social psychologists have devoted considerable theoretical and empirical attention to studying gender differences in traits desired in a mate. Most of the studies on mate preferences, however, have been conducted with small, nonrepresentative samples. In this study, we analyzed data collected from single adults in a national probability sample, the National Survey of Families and Households. Respondents were asked to consider 12 possible assets or liabilities in a marriage partner and to indicate their willingness to marry someone possessing each of these traits. These data extended previous research by comparing men's and women's mate preferences in a heterogeneous sample of the national population and by comparing gender differences in different sociodemographic groups. The gender differences found in this study were consistent with those secured in previous research (e.g., youth and physical attractiveness were found to be more important for men than for women; earning potential was found to be less important for men than for women) and were quite consistent across age groups and races. However, the various sociodemographic groups differed slightly in the magnitude of gender differences for some of the mate preferences.

Mate selection criteria have long been a topic of interest for family researchers and social psychologists. In one frequently used methodology dating back to an early study by Hill (1945), partner attributes or characteristics are listed and subjects (typically college students) are asked to rate each in importance. One issue that has been frequently examined with this "mate selection questionnaire paradigm" (Feingold, 1990) is how men and women differ in the attributes they desire in a partner (e.g., Buss & Barnes, 1986; Howard, Blumstein, & Schwartz, 1987). In this study, we extend previous research on this topic by examining gender differences in mate preferences with data from single adults in a national probability sample—the National Survey of Families and Households (NSFH).

### Theoretical Background to Gender Differences in Mate Preferences

One reason for psychologists' renewed interest in gender differences in mate selection criteria has been the development

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of evolutionary explanations for human social behavior (e.g., Buss & Schmitt, 1993; Cunningham, 1986; Kenrick & Trost, 1989). Evolutionary psychologists make clear predictions as to how men and women should differ in the traits they desire in a mate (e.g., Buss, 1989; Trivers, 1972). Buss (1989), for example, predicted that men should prefer mates with traits that signal their reproductive value (traits such as youth and good looks). Women should prefer mates with traits that signal their potential for resource acquisition (traits such as ambition and status). With these strategies, both men and women choose partners that enhance their reproductive success.

One could also explain such gender differences by referring to sociocultural factors (e.g., Buss & Barnes, 1986; Howard et al., 1987). That is, men's greater preference for a partner who is attractive and young and women's greater preference for a partner who can provide material wealth can be explained by traditional sex role socialization and the poorer economic opportunities for women.

Both theories help explain the gender differences in mate selection preferences predicted in this study. As explained by Feingold (1990), "Because evolutionary forces could shape sociocultural roles, the two types of explanations are not necessarily mutually exclusive" (p. 990).

### Previous Research on Gender Differences in Mate Preferences

Evolutionary theory and the sociocultural perspective are in agreement in predicting gender differences in the desire for the following three partner attributes: physical attractiveness, youth (both predicted to be preferred by men), and earning potential and related socioeconomic characteristics (predicted to be preferred by women). Research, reviewed below, provides support for these gender differences. Although gender differ-

ences in traits desired in a partner have been examined primarily through the mate selection questionnaire, other methods have also been used, including content analysis of personal want ads.

In studies that use the mate selection questionnaire format, men have rated physical attractiveness or good looks as more important than have women (see recent studies by Allgeier & Wiederman, 1991; Buss, 1989; Buss & Barnes, 1986; Goodwin, 1990; Howard et al., 1987; Townsend, 1989; Wiederman & Allgeier, 1992; for a meta-analysis of several studies, see Feingold, 1990). Content analysis of personal want ads, a recently developed method for studying mate selection preferences, has also demonstrated a similar gender difference: Men are more likely than women to request physical attractiveness in a partner, whereas women are more likely than men to offer it (Cameron, Oskamp, & Sparkes, 1977; Deaux & Hanna, 1984; Harrison & Saeed, 1977; Koestner & Wheeler, 1988; Rajecki, Bledsoe, & Rasmussen, 1991; see also Feingold, 1990). However, research conducted on people's reactions or behaviors toward real or hypothetical romantic others suggests that men and women value physical attractiveness to nearly the same degree (e.g., Feingold, 1990; Sprecher, 1989).

Whereas gender differences in physical attractiveness have been examined in many studies, gender differences in age preferences have not. However, in a cross-cultural study on mate preferences, Buss (1989) asked the ages respondents preferred in a marriage partner. In each of the 37 samples (from 33 countries), men generally preferred mates who were younger and women generally preferred mates who were older. Buss reported that these gender differences in age preferences were the largest gender differences found in his study on mate preferences. Research on personal want ads demonstrates a similar gender difference. Men are more likely than women to express a preference for a younger mate, whereas women are more likely than men to say they want an older mate (Bolig, Stein, & McKenry, 1984; Cameron et al., 1977; Harrison & Saeed, 1977; Rajecki et al., 1991). Furthermore, studies on decision making in video dating services indicate that men are more concerned than women with the age of a prospective match and are more likely to prefer a younger partner (Woll, 1986).

Previous research on gender differences in preferences for earning potential also provides support for the gender difference predicted about this characteristic from both evolutionary theory and the sociocultural perspective. When asked in a mate selection questionnaire what they prefer in a mate, women express a greater preference than men for earning potential or social status (e.g., Buss, 1989; Buss & Barnes, 1986; Howard et al., 1987; Townsend, 1989). Furthermore, in personal ads, financial security is more likely to be requested by women but more likely to be offered by men (Cameron et al., 1977; Harrison & Saeed, 1977; Koestner & Wheeler, 1988). In a study of the decisions made by clients in video dating organizations, Woll (1986) found that women were more likely than men to say that occupation was a factor they considered in deciding whether to request additional information about a prospective match.

In sum, there is substantial evidence for the gender differences in mate preferences predicted by evolutionary theory and the sociocultural perspective. Men value physical attractiveness and youth to a greater degree than women, and women value earning potential to a greater degree than men. There is also some

evidence to indicate that actual matches in real life reflect these sex-specific exchanges of resources (Elder, 1969; Taylor & Glenn, 1976; Udry, 1977; Udry & Eckland, 1984). We also note that men and women have been found to differ in their preferences for other characteristics. For example, in the mate selection questionnaire paradigm, women have expressed a greater preference than men for such personality characteristics as expressiveness, kindness, and considerateness (Buss, 1989; Buss & Barnes, 1986; Howard et al., 1987; Hudson & Henze, 1969).

### Purposes of This Investigation

Although gender differences in mate preferences for the above three characteristics have been examined in a number of recent studies, no previous study on this topic has been conducted with a national probability sample.<sup>1</sup> Because questions on mate selection preferences were asked of the single respondents in the NSFH, we can, for the first time, examine gender differences in mate selection preferences with a nationally representative sample of single adults.<sup>2</sup> The NSFH assesses mate preferences for 12 attributes, 8 of which are related to physical attractiveness, youth, and earning potential—the 3 characteristics discussed above. We hypothesized that men, compared with women, would be more concerned that their partner be physically attractive and younger than themselves and that women, compared with men, would be more eager to marry someone who has earning potential. We also explored gender differences in preferences for the other attributes included in the NSFH.

The second purpose of this study was to examine whether the magnitude of the gender differences in mate preferences varies across particular sociodemographic groups in the national sample. The NSFH data allow us to look at gender differences in mate preferences among single adults of different ages (from 19 to 35) and different races (Blacks and Whites). Although we expected that our predicted gender differences in mate preferences would be found in each of the sociodemographic groups, some gender differences may be more pronounced in one age group or race than in the others.

For example, we have reason to expect men's greater desire for someone younger increases with age. Kenrick and Keefe (1992) have noted that the evolutionary perspective would predict that as men age, they must become interested in younger and younger women if they are to mate with a woman still in her reproductive years (women's preferences should remain relatively constant over different ages). They found support for their hypothesis in content analyses of personal want ads collected from the United States and other countries and from an examination of actual age differences from marriage statistics.

Furthermore, Spanier and Glick (1980) and others have speculated that the shortage of men for Black women could lead to a tendency for Black women to marry men with less education, who are younger or much older, and who have been previously

<sup>1</sup> However, some previous studies have been based on large and diverse (nonprobability) samples. The Howard et al. (1987) study was based on a large, national sample, and the Buss study was based on a very large, multicultural sample.

<sup>2</sup> See South (1991) and Bulcroft and Bulcroft (1993) for additional analyses conducted with some of the data on mate selection preferences from the NSFH study.

married.<sup>3</sup> In other words, Black women, because of their limited field of eligibles, may be more willing to lower their criteria for a mate. On the other hand, Black men, who enjoy an abundance of Black women, can afford to be particularly choosy. Other ways that race and age may moderate the effect of gender on mate selection preferences are explored in this study.

## Method

### Sample

The hypotheses in this study were tested with a subsample from the NSFH, which was conducted in a 14-month period ending in May 1988. The NSFH is a multistage, area probability sample survey of 13,017 English or Spanish-speaking persons age 19 and older, living in households in the United States. Data were collected through both a face-to-face interview and a self-administered questionnaire.<sup>4</sup>

Only the unmarried respondents in the NSFH study who were age 35 or younger were asked questions about mate preferences. Those unmarried respondents age 35 or younger who had never been married and were either White or Black were included in the analyses.<sup>5</sup> Our subsample, then, consisted of 1,329 respondents, 648 (49%) men and 681 (51%) women and 854 (64%) White and 475 (36%) Black.<sup>6</sup> The mean age of the subsample was 25 ( $SD = 4.6$ ).

### Measurement of Mate Preferences

In one section of the self-administered questionnaire presented to the single adults, a section was included that began "Listed below are considerations that are important to some people in thinking about WHETHER TO MARRY someone. Please circle how willing you would be to marry someone who. . . ." This introduction was followed by a list of 12 characteristics:

1. was older than you by 5 or more years,
2. was younger than you by 5 or more years,
3. had been married before,
4. already had children,
5. was not likely to hold a steady job,
6. was of a different religion,
7. was of a different race,
8. would earn much less than you,
9. would earn much more than you,
10. was not "good-looking,"
11. had more education than you, and
12. had less education than you.

Each of these items was followed by a 7-point (1 = *not at all* and 7 = *very willing*) Likert response scale. We used Items 1 and 2 to measure preference for youth, Item 10 to measure preference for physical attractiveness, and Items 5, 8, 9, 11, and 12 to measure preference for earning potential (and social status). The other four characteristics (Items 3, 4, 6, and 7) were also examined in this study.

## Results

### Overview of Analyses

To examine the effect of gender on mate selection preferences, and the moderating influence of race and age, we conducted a  $2 \times 2 \times 3$  analysis of variance (ANOVA). The independent variables were gender (male vs. female), race (White vs. Black), and age (19–22, 23–27, and 28–35).<sup>7</sup> The dependent variables were the 12 mate selection preferences measured in the NSFH study. Because the theoretical focus of this study is on gender, the only

Table 1  
*Gender Differences in Mate Preferences for a National Sample*

Theoretical variables	<i>M</i>		<i>F</i>	<i>df</i>
	Men	Women		
Physical appearance				
Not "good-looking"	3.41	4.42	172.39**	1, 1616
Age				
Older by 5 years	4.15	5.29	182.48**	1, 1616
Younger by 5 years	4.54	2.80	394.17**	1, 1613
Earning potential				
Not likely to hold steady job	2.73	1.62	213.25**	1, 1610
Earn less than you	4.60	3.76	88.44**	1, 1611
Earn more than you	5.19	5.93	98.89**	1, 1617
More education	5.22	5.82	73.69**	1, 1617
Less education	4.67	4.08	39.00**	1, 1614
Other variables				
Married before	3.35	3.44	2.03	1, 1616
Already had children	2.84	3.11	9.56*	1, 1608
Different religion	4.24	4.31	0.76	1, 1613
Different race	3.08	2.84	12.97**	1, 1609

\*  $p < .01$ . \*\*  $p < .001$ .

results presented below for race and age are for the interaction effects that also include gender.

### Gender Differences in Mate Preferences

First, the main effect of gender was examined to see if there was any support for the hypothesis that men and women differ in their preferences for physical attractiveness, youth, and earning potential. Table 1 shows that the main effect for gender was consistent with this hypothesis and statistically significant ( $p < .001$ ). Women were more willing than men to marry someone who was not good-looking, someone who was older by 5 years, someone who earned more, and someone who had more education. Men were more willing than women to marry someone who was younger by 5 years, someone not likely to have a steady job, someone who earned less, and someone who had less education.

<sup>3</sup> There is no evidence for this hypothesis, however. In fact, Black professional women may maintain their standards and choose to remain single (Sparrow, 1991).

<sup>4</sup> See Sweet, Bumpass, and Call (1988) for a more detailed description of the survey.

<sup>5</sup> Although other races were also included in the NSFH data, we believed that there were too few respondents in the other races to include them in a full ANOVA.

<sup>6</sup> The frequencies are based on unweighted data. Blacks were oversampled in the NSFH study. All other statistical computations were performed using the case weight. The case weight, used when the individual is the unit of analysis, takes into account the differential probability of selection.

<sup>7</sup> Age was divided into these three groups because they seem to represent meaningful age clusters and because this division allowed us to divide the sample into three approximately equal groups: 482 respondents were age 19–22, 444 were age 23–27, and 403 were age 28–35.

Significant gender differences were also found on two of the other four attributes included in the NSFH mate selection list. Women were more willing to marry someone who already had children, and men were more willing than women to marry someone of a different race. No gender differences were found in willingness to marry someone who was married before or someone of a different religion.

### *Gender Differences in Different Sociodemographic Groups*

The above results provide support for the gender differences predicted from evolutionary theory and from the sociocultural perspective concerning preferences for physical attractiveness, youth, and earning potential. The findings are also consistent with previous research. Next, we examined whether gender differences in mate preferences depend on race or age. To consider this, we look at the Gender  $\times$  Race, the Gender  $\times$  Age, and the Gender  $\times$  Race  $\times$  Age interactions from the ANOVA results.<sup>8</sup>

**Race.** The Gender  $\times$  Race interaction was significant for only two attributes. The largest interaction was found for "not likely to hold a steady job,"  $F(1, 1610) = 14.95, p < .001$ . For both Blacks and Whites, women were less willing than men to marry someone who was unlikely to hold a steady job. This gender difference, however, was greater among Whites ( $M = 2.76$  for White men and 1.48 for White women;  $t = 17.81, p < .001$ ) than among Blacks ( $M = 2.56$  for Black men and 2.01 for Black women;  $t = 2.65, p < .01$ ). Of these four sociodemographic groups, White women were least willing to marry someone who was not likely to hold a steady job.

The second significant Gender  $\times$  Race interaction was found for the attribute not good-looking,  $F(1, 1616) = 3.91, p < .05$ . For both races, men were less willing than women to marry someone who was not good-looking. This gender difference, however, was greater among Whites ( $M = 3.42$  for White men and 4.55 for White women;  $t = -13.12, p < .001$ ) than among Blacks ( $M = 3.31$  for Black men and 4.05 for Black women;  $t = -3.81, p < .001$ ). Of the four sociodemographic groups, White women were most willing to marry someone who was not attractive.

**Age.** A Gender  $\times$  Age interaction was significant ( $p < .05$ ) for three attributes, two of which were among our theoretical variables. First, an interaction was found for "earns less than you,"  $F(2, 1611) = 3.71, p < .05$ . In all three age groups (19–22, 23–27, and 28–35), men were more willing than women to marry someone who earned less than they. This difference between men and women, however, was greater for the middle age group ( $M = 4.72$  for men and 3.60 for women;  $t = 6.82, p < .001$ ) than for the oldest age group ( $M = 4.48$  for men and 3.43 for women;  $t = 5.18, p < .001$ ) and the youngest age group ( $M = 4.56$  for men and 3.96 for women;  $t = 5.12, p < .001$ ). When we consider the six sociodemographic groups formed by combining gender and age, the group least willing to marry someone who earned less than they did was the female group aged 28–35.

Another significant Gender  $\times$  Age interaction was found for "had more education,"  $F(2, 1617) = 3.11, p < .05$ . In all three age groups, women were more willing than men to marry someone with more education. The difference between the genders, however, was greater for the youngest age group ( $M = 5.17$  for

men and 5.96 for women,  $t = -7.86, p < .001$ ) than for either the middle age group ( $M = 5.35$  for men and 5.69 for women,  $t = -2.52, p < .05$ ) or the oldest age group ( $M = 5.13$  for men and 5.61 for women,  $t = -2.82, p < .01$ ). Young women were particularly willing to marry someone who had more education.

Finally, a significant Gender  $\times$  Age interaction was found for "already had children,"  $F(2, 1608) = 2.96, p = .052$ . Although in all three age groups women were more willing to marry someone who already had children, the difference between men and women was significant only in the oldest age group (youngest age group  $M = 2.67$  for men and 2.81 for women,  $t = -1.28, ns$ ; middle age group  $M = 3.02$  for men and 3.25 for women,  $t = -1.42, ns$ ; oldest age group  $M = 3.03$  for men and 3.75 for women,  $t = -3.25, p < .001$ ). The particular sociodemographic group that was most willing to marry someone who already had children was women in the 28–35 age range.

**Race and age: A three-way interaction.** A significant three-way interaction was found for only one item, "younger by 5 years,"  $F(2, 1613) = 3.82, p < .05$ . For both the youngest and the middle age groups, the degree of difference between men and women in willingness to marry someone younger by 5 years was very similar in both races. Men of both races were more willing than women of both races to marry someone younger ( $M = 4.29$  for men and 2.41 for women among 19- to 22-year-old Blacks;  $M = 4.27$  for men and 2.60 for women among 19- to 22-year-old Whites;  $M = 4.24$  for men and 2.53 for women among 23- to 27-year-old Blacks; and  $M = 4.75$  for men and 2.78 for women among 23- to 27-year-old Whites). In the 28–35 age group, however, the difference between men and women was exceptionally large among Blacks ( $M = 5.00$  for men and 2.55 for women) but smaller among Whites ( $M = 5.06$  for men and 4.07 for women). Thus, it seems that men's willingness to marry someone younger increased with age, and this is true regardless of race. For women, however, changes over age depend on race. Black women experienced no change with age in their willingness to marry someone younger, whereas White women, the older they got, became more willing to marry someone younger and, hence, became more similar to men in this preference.

<sup>8</sup> As described, the only results presented in the text for race and age are the interaction effects that include gender. The main effect of race was significant (at least at the  $p < .05$  level) for 8 of the 12 characteristics examined. Compared with Black respondents, White respondents were more willing to marry someone who was not good-looking ( $M = 3.86$  for Whites and 3.70 for Blacks), was younger by 5 years ( $M = 3.92$  for Whites and 3.40 for Blacks), earned less ( $M = 4.37$  for Whites and 3.77 for Blacks), had more education ( $M = 5.53$  for Whites and 5.22 for Blacks) and had less education ( $M = 4.56$  for Whites and 3.85 for Blacks), had been married before ( $M = 3.46$  for Whites and 3.10 for Blacks), and was of a different religion ( $M = 4.32$  for Whites and 4.09 for Blacks). Blacks were more willing to marry someone of a different race ( $M = 2.78$  for Whites and 3.89 for Blacks). A main effect ( $p < .001$ ) of age was significant for only three of the specific characteristics. With increasing age, respondents in the age groups 19–22, 23–27, and 28–35 were more willing to marry someone younger by 5 years ( $M = 3.53, 3.96, \text{ and } 4.38$ ), someone who had been married before ( $M = 3.12, 3.49, \text{ and } 3.97$ ), and someone who already had children ( $M = 2.73, 3.10, \text{ and } 3.35$ ).

## Discussion

We had two goals in this study. First, we wanted to know whether the gender differences in mate preferences found in earlier research (conducted with nonprobability samples) would replicate in a national probability sample. The second goal was to examine whether the magnitude of the gender differences in mate selection preferences depends on age and race.

### *Do the Gender Differences Replicate?*

We found clear support that the gender differences found in previous studies replicate in a national probability sample. More specifically, men were more willing than women to marry someone younger by 5 years (the largest gender difference found), someone who was not likely to hold a steady job, someone who earned less, and someone who had less education. Women were more willing than men to marry someone who was not good-looking, someone older by 5 years, someone who earned more than they, and someone who had more education. All of these gender differences were fairly large in magnitude (all were significant at  $p < .001$ ).

These gender differences are consistent with previous research and with two theoretical perspectives on gender differences in human behavior. In evolutionary terms, men should prefer mates who possess traits signaling their reproductive value—traits such as youth and good looks—whereas women should prefer men who possess traits that signal their potential for resource acquisition—men who are able and willing to provide resources. These same gender differences, however, can also be explained by women's relative lack of access to societal resources and by traditional sex role socialization (the sociocultural perspective).

Although most of the items included in the list of assets and liabilities in the NSFH data refer to preferences for either youth, physical attractiveness, or earning potential (our theoretical variables), there were four other assets and liabilities included. No gender differences were found in either willingness to marry someone who had been married before or willingness to marry someone of a different religion. However, women were more willing than men to marry someone who already had children, and men were more willing than women to marry someone who was of a different race. These gender differences, however, were smaller in magnitude than the gender differences found for the theoretical variables.

Women may be more willing than men to marry someone who already has children because, compared with men, women have a limited number of years in which they are fertile and thus they may be more willing to consider alternative routes to parenthood. (According to this argument, we would expect to find that women's, but not men's, willingness to marry someone with children increases with age—indeed, we did secure a significant Gender  $\times$  Age interaction on this item that reflects this pattern, which we discuss below.) Men may also express more reluctance than women to marry someone who already has children because they may be more likely than women to assume that they will have to be involved in the raising of the children (thus, taking away scarce resources from their own actual or future biological children). Custody of children is still more likely to go to mothers than to fathers. The finding that men

expressed more willingness to marry someone of a different race may be explained, in part, by differential socialization of men and women. For example, daughters get more pressure than sons to marry according to endogamous norms (e.g., Prather, 1990), most likely because daughters are considered the link to the next generation and more generally are subject to greater parental influence. Although Black men's greater willingness, relative to Black women's, to marry a person of another race is consistent with actual marriage statistics, White men's greater willingness, relative to White women's, is not. Marriages between White women and Black men are more common than those between White men and Black women (see discussion by Murstein, 1986). This discrepancy between mate selection preferences and actual marriage statistics (at least for marriages between White men and Black women) is interesting and should be further investigated. In the formation of interracial relationships, opportunities may predominate over personal preferences.

### *Are Gender Differences in Mate Preferences Modified by Age or Race?*

Our second goal was to examine the extent to which gender differences found in mate preferences depend on age and race. We found that, in the main, the gender differences summarized above existed regardless of age (from 19 to 35) or race (Black vs. White). However, the various sociodemographic groups did differ slightly in the magnitude of gender differences for some of the preferences. That is, a few significant Gender  $\times$  Race and Gender  $\times$  Age interactions were found, as well as one significant Gender  $\times$  Race  $\times$  Age interaction. However, the magnitude of all of these interactions was much smaller than the main effect for gender.

Let us first consider how gender differences in mate preferences depend on race. A significant interaction between gender and race was found for the item "was not likely to hold a steady job." We found that White men were more willing than Black men to marry a woman who did not possess a steady job. Women, White and Black, were less willing to marry a man who did not have a regular job. However, White women indicated more often than Black women that a man must have a steady job before they would consider marriage. White women do not face the same kind of shortage of "acceptable" men that Black women face, and hence this may be reflected in their tendency to be more demanding that their mate have a steady job. However, note that this interaction was not found for the other traits referring to earning potential (relative earning and relative education).

We also secured a weak but significant interaction between gender and race on the question about willingness to marry someone who was not good-looking. For both groups, men were more insistent than women that their mates be attractive. Again, however, race tempers these preferences. Black women were less willing than White women to marry someone who was not good-looking. In a small study conducted with professional Black women, Sparrow (1991) also found that physical attractiveness was rated as a relatively important quality for a mate to have (rated 7th out of 20 and rated as more important than money and occupation). It is not quite clear why White women rated looks as less important than other assets, whereas Black

women did not. As we discuss later, the benefits of marriage may be less for Black women.

Age also shapes the pattern of gender differences found in mate preferences. First, an interaction between gender and age was found on the question "earns less than you." In the younger age group (19–22), both men and women were fairly willing to marry someone who earned less than they (and men were slightly more willing than women). As men and women aged, however, their concerns began to diverge. The older women got, the less willing they became to marry a man who earned less than they. There may be at least two reasons for this. First, as women get older, they may increasingly hear their "biological clocks" ticking. They may become more concerned about finding a man who can, if not support them, at least pull his own financial weight during their childbearing years. Second, as men and women get older, they begin to "hit their economic stride." When men and women are young, perhaps in college, it would not be surprising for both of them to work at low-paying jobs. They may not be too concerned about who makes more money. As men and women get older, the gap between what men and women "normally" make begins to diverge. Perhaps when an older woman thinks of marrying a man who earns less, she envisions a man far below her in socioeconomic status; in any case the consequences of a discrepancy may now be far more serious.

We also secured a significant Gender  $\times$  Age interaction for "had more education." At every age group, women were more willing than men to marry someone with more education. Younger women, however, were especially willing to marry someone with more education than themselves. This does not seem to make sense, either from a sociobiological or a practical perspective. As women get older, the marriage market begins to close in on them. We would expect them to get more tolerant, not less. (For example, we found an interaction between gender and age on the question "already had children." Older women were more willing than others to marry a man who already had children.) However, this finding does make sense if we consider that many of the young women, who may not have yet finished their own educational pursuits, would likely be looking at a dating market of slightly older men. Longitudinal research is needed to further clarify how gender differences in mate preferences might depend on age. In cross-sectional analyses, as done in this study, the group of individuals who reach 28 years of age or older and are not yet married may be different from individuals who have married by this age. Furthermore, gender differences in the age range past the years of fertility are important to examine and are not addressed here.

We secured only one significant three-way interaction—a Gender  $\times$  Age  $\times$  Race interaction for the item "younger by 5 years." For relatively young (19–27) men and women, the pattern of gender differences was similar in both races: Men were more willing than women to marry someone who was younger. However, in the age group 28–35, Black women and White women diverged in their preferences. Black women experienced no change with age in their willingness to marry someone younger, whereas White women, the older they got, became more willing to marry someone younger. (Men's desire to marry someone younger increased with age, regardless of race.) It is not quite clear why Black women in this older age group did not, like their White counterparts, also become more willing to marry younger men. South (1991) offered a number of possible

reasons why Black women do not seem to respond to "marriage market" pressures:

Thus, the economic benefits to marriage are less for black women. . . . This differential could lead black women to limit their field of acceptable mates, as well as to delay marriage or to remain unmarried. . . .

In addition, among African Americans (and perhaps other groups) there may exist norms and social networks supportive of singlehood, which render marriage a less desired state. These norms and networks may reduce the financial and emotional costs of nonmarriage, allowing those who do marry greater discrimination in choosing a spouse. (p. 938)

### Conclusion

The gender differences in mate preferences that we secured were consistent with those that are predicted by both evolutionary theory and the sociocultural perspective and consistent with those secured in previous research. This means that even though the previous studies used nonprobability samples, their results were essentially correct. That is, the gender patterns previously observed in mainly White college students appear to be found among both Whites and Blacks and among adults of different ages (19–35). With increased egalitarianism in heterosexual relationships, will men and women continue to have different mate selection preferences? The evolutionary explanation for gender differences in preferences suggests that we will continue to find differences between men and women in desire for physical attractiveness, youth, and earning potential—even with changing social conditions. On the other hand, gender differences in mate selection preferences could narrow in the next 2 decades as young males and females are socialized to value the same traits and are presented with equal opportunities in the larger social structure.

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