Women

Change over time
Emerging adulthood is viewed by developmental psychologists as a critical period of romantic expression and growth that helps individuals form their relationship identities (Arnett, 2004).

Due to a general lack of longitudinal studies on the subject, relationship scientists currently know little about this period of growth and whether individuals’ mating orientations and preferences are actually changing over time.

Despite this lack of knowledge, college students have consistent shared assumptions about how their peers’ mating preferences mature over the course of their college years. According to one study, college students expect their emerging adult peers to become less oriented toward opportunistic sex and physical appearance as they progress through college (Blonk-Rechek et al., 2009).

Sex variation
Little is known about change over time, but extensive research has documented systematic similarities and differences in men’s and women’s mate preferences and mating orientations. Attitudes toward long-term and short-term sexual relationships (Buss, 1992).

In this study we looked to replicate the many previous findings regarding sex similarities and differences, and we also looked to use a longitudinal research method to test assumptions about change over time.

METHOD
Overview
In 2009, we collected responses from a non-random sample of undergraduate students (263 women, 110 men; mean age = 18.90, the majority were freshmen. In 2012, we obtained follow-up responses from 200 of the 244 original participants who were still enrolled at the university (141 women, 59 men; mean age = 21.46).

Mating Attitudes and Experiences
Participants completed Jackson and Kirkpatrick’s (2007) measure of short-term and long-term mating orientation. They were also asked to report sexual activity, including number of long-term relationship partners ever (4 months or more), number of one-time sex partners ever, and the number of sex partners in the previous year.

Mating Preferences
Participants completed a task in which they were allotted 50 “mate dollars” toward conceptualizing the ideal romantic partner. They distributed the money in line with their preferred mate dollar budget across the following characteristics: attraction, desirability, children, emotional stability, faithfulness, intelligence, physical attractiveness, potential for financial success, sense of humor, similar values, and social popularity. They were not allowed more than 10 dollars per attribute, and their total dollars spent had to add up to 50. Similar budgeting exercises have been used by other researchers (L.J. Kennith, 2006).

RELATIONSHIP ATTITUDES: LONG-TERM AND SHORT-TERM MATING ORIENTATIONS AND EXPERIENCES

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MATE PREFERENCES: AGE AND SEX VARIATION IN HOW STUDENTS SPEND THEIR “MATE DOLLARS”

DIFFERENCES AND SIMILARITIES BETWEEN MEN AND WOMEN

Women allocated more “mate dollars” toward physical attractiveness and intelligence than women did. In fact, the sex differences in allocations for physical attractiveness were much larger than any other effect of sex or age in the sample (p < .015).

Men allocated more “mate dollars” toward physical attractiveness and intelligence than women did. What, whether, and how much students spend their “mate dollars” toward their desired characteristics is an important determinant of how these characteristics are distributed.

SEX VARIATION

Our data show many examples of similar sex differences and differences that correlate with previous research. Overall, both sexes report a stronger orientation toward long-term mating than toward short-term mating. Women were significantly higher in long-term mating orientation than men were; and attitudes toward short-term sexual relationships were more favorable among men than among time partners.

Allocation in the mate dollar budgeting exercise also aligned with previous research. Men placed greater emphasis on physical attractiveness that women did and women placed greater emphasis on ambition and potential for financial success than men did.

Change across time
College students believe that relationship orientations and mate preferences of emerging adults are maturing as they age (Blonk-Rechek, et al., 2009), but our study did not reveal that maturation, at least over the three-year span we surveyed.

College students predicted that interest in meaningful, lasting relationships would increase as students progressed through college, but in our sample attitudes toward long-term mating did not change over time. In fact, long-term mating attitudes were at near-ceiling levels at both time points.

Some students also predicted that interest in friendship and sexual relationships would decrease as students matured; however, men remained consistent in their attitudes toward short-term mating and women’s attitudes actually increased in addition, individuals reported having had sex with more partners during their fourth year than they had reported having during their first year.

Another prevalent assumption was that students place more emphasis on a partner’s personality as they transition from graduation and less emphasis on a partner’s physical attractiveness. Although physical attractiveness decreased in value for women, men valued it highly at both time points.

Simulations
This study casts data from self-reported preferences rather than underlying actual mating decisions. However, our sample’s reported mate preferences align with actual mate selections recorded in speed dating research (Todd, et al., 2007). Our data reinforce the importance of checking people’s assumptions about their own and others’ behavior against actual observations and systematic data on behavior.

SELECT REFERENCES


We thank the Office of Research and Sponsored Programs at UWM for supporting this research, numerous faculty and individuals who provided data collection, and Learning & Technology Services at UWM for printing this paper. This research was supported by the UWM Foundation and by multiple Lauren Spencer Research Grants from the Office of Research and Sponsored Programs at UWM.

Romantic Relationship Attitudes and Partner Preferences: A Longitudinal Test of Change During Emerging Adulthood

Danielle Ryan, Bryan Donovan, and Eric Hanley + Faculty Mentor: April Blonk-Rechek

BACKGROUND

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