

Age preferences for mates as related to gender, own age, and involvement level

Bram P. Buunk^{a,*}, Pieterneel Dijkstra^a, Douglas T. Kenrick^b, Astrid Warntjes^a

^a*Department of Social and Organizational Psychology, University of Groningen, Grote Kruisstraat 2/1, 9712 TS Groningen, The Netherlands*

^b*Department of Psychology, Arizona State University, Tempe, AZ 85287-1104, USA*

Received 1 March 2000; accepted 7 March 2001

Abstract

The present study examined desired minimum and maximum ages for mates across five different levels of relationship involvement (marriage, serious relationship, falling in love, casual sex, and sexual fantasies) comparing individuals of 20, 30, 40, 50, and 60 years old. Consistent with previous findings, women preferred partners of their own age, regardless of their own age and regardless of the level of relationship involvement. Men, on the other hand, regardless of their own age, desired mates for short-term mating and for sexual fantasies who were in their reproductive years. However, with regard to long-term mates, men preferred mates who, although younger than them, were sometimes above the age of maximum fertility. Explanations for these findings are discussed. © 2001 Elsevier Science Inc. All rights reserved.

Keywords: Mate selection; Sex; Age preferences; Evolutionary psychology

1. Introduction

Based on an evolutionary life history model, Kenrick and Keefe (1992) argued that males and females should differ in age preferences for mates and that those differences should vary with the age of subjects. Regardless of their own age, males should pay more attention to signs of youth in a mate because this signals fertility. In contrast, females should in general

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +31-50-3636380; fax: +31-50-3634581.

E-mail address: a.p.buunk@ppsw.rug.nl (B.P. Buunk).

prefer somewhat older males, i.e. males who have achieved the status to provide resources and who still have many years ahead to remain a good provider. A series of studies has confirmed these predictions (e.g., Kenrick & Keefe, 1992; Kenrick, Keefe, Bryan, Barr, & Brown, 1995; Wiederman, 1993). These studies found that females in all age groups have a preference for males who are around their own age up to about 10 years older than them. In contrast, males as they grow older develop a preference for women who are progressively younger than them. Actual marriage data reflect these preferences in a diverse array of historical and geographic conditions, including North Americans (Kenrick & Keefe, 1992), Brazilians (Otta, Quieroz, Campos, daSilva, & Silveira, 1999), Moroccans (Walter, 1997), the Herrero in Africa (Harpending, 1992), natives of the isolated island of Poro in the Philippines (Kenrick & Keefe, 1992), and the inhabitants of prosperous seventeenth century Amsterdam (Buunk, Kenrick, Lockwood, & Nieuwenboer, 1996).

Nevertheless, there is a number of potential ambiguities in the age preference data and in the theoretical interpretation of these data. Some commentators have observed that older men are still marrying and advertising for women past the years of maximum fertility (i.e. the early 20s) or even past the fertile years (Einson, 1997; Rasmussen et al., 1998). How does that fit the assumption that males have evolved to pay attention to cues of fertility in women? A first explanation is that in present society, many women past their fertile years look much younger than they would have in ancestral times. A second explanation is that because men and women have to compete in a marriage market, they will have to adjust their preferences to what they can obtain. Because not everyone marries a millionaire or a movie star, it would not be justified to conclude that a concern for the ability to acquire resources or for physical attractiveness does not generally play a role in mate choice, all else equal.

A third explanation is that men's preferences are also determined by what the relatives of younger women would accept and by what younger women want. Because women across the life span prefer partners who are only slightly older than them and not men who are relatively old or young (Kenrick & Keefe, 1997), the discrepancy between men's desires and actual marriage or dating behavior will be particularly large among men who are much older or younger than women in their reproductive years. Only older males with high status may be able to attract females who are at their peak of fertility. Whereas men in their teens indeed feel attracted to women in their reproductive years, i.e. up to 7 or 8 years older than them, these women show scant interest in them (Kenrick, Gabrielidis, Keefe, & Cornelius, 1996). Indeed, very few teenage boys and only 5% of men over 40 (Einson, 1997) get to marry women in their peak reproductive years. Nevertheless, if men's expressed preferences were unconstrained by market pressures, the life history model of age preferences would lead us to predict that they would feel sexually attracted to women in their reproductive years. Thus, one explanation for the observation that older men are still marrying and advertising for women who, although considerably younger than them, are past the years of maximum fertility is that they have adjusted their demands to the restriction of the marriage market: they will only marry and advertise for mates who they think might be interested and available.

An additional explanation for the finding that older men marry and advertise for wives who, although considerably younger than them, are too old to produce offspring is that besides the attention males pay to cues to fertility, men also weigh other considerations

related to attractiveness, particularly those involving a potential mate's similarity (Kenrick & Keefe, 1992). Numerous studies support the general importance of similarity in mate attraction (Byrne, 1971). However, it can be argued that the relative balance between considerations of similarity and preference for youth will be, at least partly, determined by men's choice of sexual strategy. In long-term relationships, considerations with regard to similarity ought to weigh relatively heavily. In relatively short relationships, on the other hand, men ought to weigh considerations with regard to youth relatively heavily (Kenrick & Keefe, 1992).

There are additional factors that would lead a male to consider age similarity in the equation. Although no longer of direct reproductive value, a new mate of approximately the same age may provide the benefits that would otherwise be gained from their previous mate, such as (grand)motherly care for offspring. To summarize, there is a number of factors that might lead men to simultaneously be interested in women considerably younger than them yet still often court and marry women past the years of maximum fertility. These include market pressures from competitors within one's sex, the desires of the opposite sex, the relational coordination advantages of long-term bonds with similar others, and the greater experience of older women that could contribute to a man's parenting and grandparenting efforts with regard to existing kin.

Because all data thus far have come from studies of actual marriages and singles ads, it is difficult to disentangle deep-rooted desires and preferences from preferences and behaviors constrained by the pressures of the market place and related pragmatic considerations. What would adults ask for if their desires were unconstrained? One way to address this question is to consider sexual fantasies (see Ellis & Symons, 1990). In the research presented here, we assessed age preferences for partners of varying involvement levels by individuals from various age groups. We employed five levels of relationship involvement: sexual fantasy, one-night stand, being in love, steady dating, and marriage. "Being in love" is an imperfect translation of the Dutch term "verliefdheid," which is a state somewhere between what has been designated in the English language literature as *passionate love*, *being in love*, and *limerence*. We expected that with increasing age, men, but not women, would show a stronger preference for younger partners and that this preference would be more pronounced as the level of involvement decreases. Sexual fantasies, which do not involve pragmatic constraints, should demonstrate the strongest evidence of a male sexual attraction towards women in the years of peak fertility. Marital relationships, which involve a maximum number of other considerations, should show the most relative weighting of similarity (while retaining a noticeable sex difference due to the male attraction towards females in the years of peak fertility).

2. Method

2.1. Subjects

A total of 70 men and 67 women participated in the study. To enhance the power of the analyses, only participants of 20, 30, 40, 50, and 60 years of age were asked to participate in

the study. For all age groups, individuals maximally 1 year older or 1 year younger were also allowed to participate. Thus, for example, the 40-year age group included individuals of 39, 40, and 41 years of age.

2.2. Procedure

In various public places in the province of Groningen, such as railway stations, libraries, and shopping malls, during about 10 days, all individuals who walked by were approached and asked to participate in a study. About half of the individuals approached agreed to participate. After they were assessed if their age met the requirements, people were told that the study concerned preferences with respect to a partner. It was emphasized that all data would be processed anonymously and that it was important to answer the questions as honestly as possible. The questionnaires were filled out on location. After assessing some demographic variables, all subjects were asked to rate their preferences. These questions were based upon Kenrick et al. (1996) and were introduced with the following statement: “Think for a few seconds about an attractive person of the opposite sex. Suppose you would want to sexually fantasize about/have a casual affair with/fall in love with/have a serious relationship with/marry this person. Assume that this person would also want to sexually fantasize about/have a casual affair with/fall in love with/have a serious relationship with/marry you, and there would be an opportunity to sexually fantasize/have a casual affair/fall in love/have a serious relationship/marry.” Participants were asked to indicate “What is the minimal/maximal age of a partner you would want to sexually fantasize about/have a casual affair with/fall in love with/have a serious relationship with/marry?”

The order for the five levels of relationship involvement was randomized. To minimize any confounds, the presentation was the same for all involvement levels, including “falling in love” and “sexual fantasy” (even though these types of involvement do not all require the other person to want the same).

3. Results

3.1. Minimum age

A $2 \times 5 \times 5$ (Between sex \times Between age \times Within involvement level) ANOVA was executed with the minimum age preferred in a partner as the dependent variable. This analysis produced a significant main effect of sex [$F(1,120)=117.37$, $P<.001$], indicating that men were in general interested in younger partners than women, as well as a significant main effect of age [$F(4,120)=102.18$, $P<.001$], indicating that the older the respondents were, the higher the minimum preferred age. These main effects were qualified by a significant interaction effect between sex and age [$F(4,120)=8.53$, $P<.001$]. This effect replicates earlier findings. The minimum age preferred by women increases with age and hovers around 3–4 years less than one’s own age. In contrast, the minimum age preferred by

men diverged more and more from their own age and differed increasingly from that preferred by women (as in Kenrick & Keefe, 1992).

There was also a significant effect of involvement level [$F(4,480)=51.22$], indicating that the lower the involvement level, the lower the minimum age. There was no significant interaction between sex and involvement level [$F(4,480)=1.37$, ns]. However, the main effect of involvement level was qualified by a significant interaction with age [$F(16,480)=6.07$, $P<.001$] and a significant three-way interaction between sex, age, and involvement level [$F(16,480)=1.71$, $P<.05$]. As Fig. 1 shows, the older men were, the larger the discrepancies in minimum age required for partners of various levels of involvement. Whereas younger men had similar preferred minimum ages for partners of various involvement levels, among older men, these ages diverged considerably. In particular, the difference between one's own age and the minimum age specified for low levels of involvement was larger. The most dramatic drop occurred with respect to the minimum age for a sexual fantasy partner. Men of 40, 50, and 60 all seemed to show an interest in partners for sexual fantasies and casual affairs that extended down into the mid to late 20s.

In contrast, there were considerably smaller differences between women of different age groups in the effect of involvement level upon the minimum age preferred. Women in general preferred men as potential spouse who were slightly older than them, and although older women would find considerably younger partners acceptable for casual affairs and sexual fantasies, even in these groups, the differences in minimum age requirements for the various levels of involvement were much smaller than among men (Fig. 2). Compare, for instance, individuals of 50 years of age: men would want sexual fantasy and casual sex partners more than 10 years younger than women prefer.

3.2. *Maximum age*

A similar ANOVA on maximum age produced significant main effects of sex [$F(1,120)=36.08$, $P<.001$] and age [$F(4,120)=59.34$, $P<.001$]. There was no significant interaction between age and sex [$F(4,120)=1.61$, $P=.18$]. Again, there was a significant effect of involvement level [$F(4,480)=7.00$], indicating that the lower the involvement level, the lower the maximum acceptable age. There was again no significant interaction between sex and involvement level [$F(4,480)=0.35$, ns]. The main effect of involvement level was again qualified by a significant interaction with age [$F(16,480)=5.37$, $P<.001$] and a significant three-way interaction between sex, age, and involvement level [$F(16,480)=2.70$, $P<.001$]. These findings were different from those found with respect to the minimum ages preferred. As Fig. 3 shows, whereas among men in their 20s, the preferred maximum ages were at least 5 years above their own age, these preferences differed considerably for the various involvement levels. For low levels of involvement, especially for sexual fantasy and casual affairs, men in their 20s found partners who were more than 10 years above their own age acceptable but would not want a spouse more than 5 years older than they were. With increasing age, the acceptable maximum age for casual sex and sexual fantasy partners compared to one's own age became considerably lower, and this occurred most dramatically

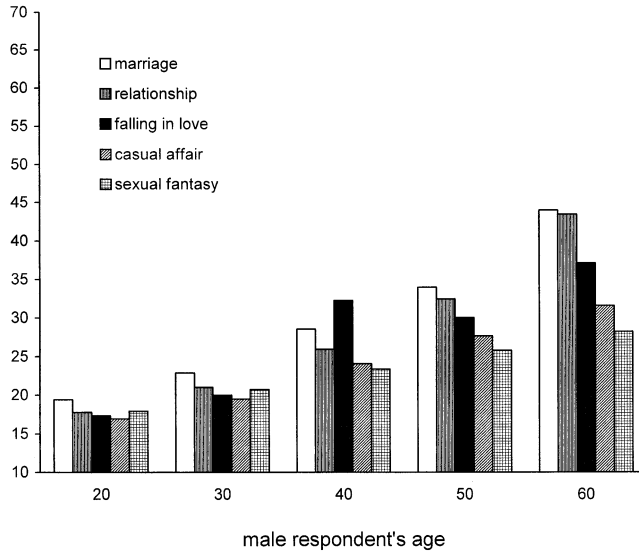


Fig. 1. Mean minimal age of an acceptable partner for different levels of involvement as a function of male respondent's age.

in men between the ages of 50 and 60, who preferred partners for “loose” involvements not to be older than their early 40s.

In contrast, with one minor exception, the maximum ages preferred by women were consistent for all ages and all involvement levels above their own age, although less so the

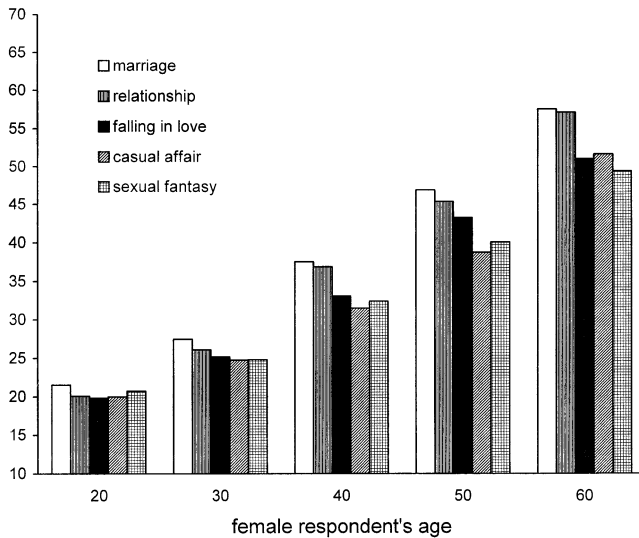


Fig. 2. Mean minimal age of an acceptable partner for different levels of involvement as a function of female respondent's age.

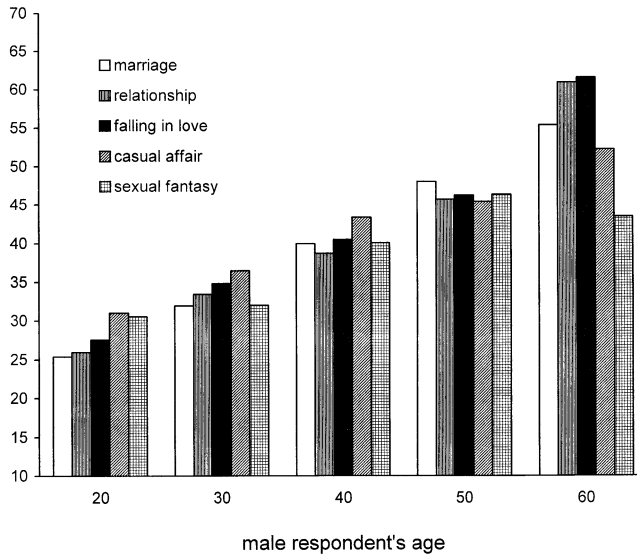


Fig. 3. Mean maximum age of an acceptable partner for different levels of involvement as a function of male respondent's age.

older the women were (see Fig. 4). Moreover, there were only minor differences between the age groups in the variation across involvement levels.

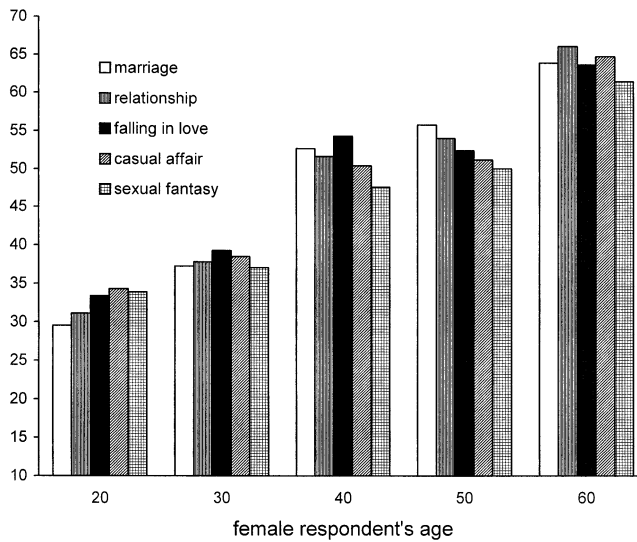


Fig. 4. Mean maximum age of an acceptable partner for different levels of involvement as a function of female respondent's age.

4. Discussion

The present data suggest that women's partner preferences follow a simple rule: they prefer men around their own age, with a range from slightly younger to slightly older. Regardless of the involvement level and regardless of their own age, women prefer partners who are slightly younger to slightly older than them. Older women do not express an attraction in their sexual fantasies to young men nor do they prefer casual sex with such men. These findings support the life history model of age preferences, which posits that women's sexual psychology is basically different from that of men. To the extent that the preference for a sexual fantasy partner particularly reflects deep-rooted preferences not tainted by pragmatic and realistic considerations (Ellis & Symons, 1990), the present findings offer strong support for the hypothesis that men have an evolved tendency to feel primarily attracted to women of reproductive age.

These findings offer no support for the assumption that males follow a sociocultural model, which presumes that men prefer less powerful younger women (e.g., Eagly & Wood, 1999). In fact, for those around 20 years of age, the preferred maximum ages were at least 5 years above their own age, and even more telling, men in their 20s did find sexual fantasy partners 10 years above their own age acceptable. This is in line with the study by Kenrick et al. (1996), who found that boys in their teens felt attracted to women quite above their own age, i.e. up to 7 or 8 years older than them but not much younger. Second, as men grow older, the discrepancy between their own age and the maximal acceptable age of a sexual fantasy partner falls directly in line with the assumption that men have not been selected to prefer younger women but rather to prefer women who signal reproductive potential. That is, all men of 40 years and older did prefer partners for sexual fantasy and for casual sex not to be older than in the beginning of their 40s — precisely the upper limit of the reproductive period of women. In addition, without the constraints of younger women's preferences and other pragmatic considerations to deal with, these men expressed an attraction to women several decades younger than them, with minimum ages in the 20s. Whereas women of 50 and 60 might have sexual fantasies about men their own age, men in these age groups do not fantasize about women their own age.

Kenrick and Keefe (1992) found that men in the oldest groups were interested in women who, although younger than them, were nevertheless somewhat above, and sometimes beyond, the age of maximal fertility. Some have taken this to be a challenge to an evolutionary interpretation of age preference data (e.g. Einon, 1997; Rasmussen et al., 1998). The present data, however, show that although men over 40 feel most attracted to women in their reproductive age when it comes to short-term mating, older men report a potential long-term mate's age that is less discrepant from their own. As suggested earlier, one possible reason is that for long-term relationships, men settle for women close to their own age not because that is their desire but because competition with younger men puts a constraint on their ability to convert their wishes into reality. Note for instance that men of 60 years old would marry a woman of 55 but would not engage in sexual fantasies about women that age. A second possible reason for the discrepancy between the preferred ages for mates for short-term mating vs. long-term mating is that for both types of mating, men desire

different age levels. The smaller discrepancy in age between one's self and a potential mate for a long-term relationship may reflect the relatively strong emphasis men put on similarity in a long-term mate. In contrast, in relatively short relationships, men will more strongly emphasize a potential mate's youthfulness, preferring women in their reproductive years over older ones (Kenrick & Keefe, 1992). It may be noted that even for casual sex and sexual fantasies, older men differ from younger men in preferring women who are at least 25 years old. On the basis of the present study, it is not possible to completely disentangle whether such considerations do indeed shape men's preferences or whether men's fundamental partner preferences do change when they grow older. Nevertheless, it must be emphasized that the present data suggest that after men reach 40, virtually no changes in preferences for the minimum age of fantasy and casual sex partners occur. Women's preferences diverge considerably from men's preferences. In general, women seem to have a balance between their sexual desires and their actual marital preferences: they might marry the type of men they find suitable for sexual fantasies and casual sex.

There is a number of potential limitations of the present study. First, it is possible that the method for selecting participants biased the sample towards more extraverted men who would be more open to dating younger women. Second, we used only a self-report method to assess preferences, and future research would have to include multiple methods to ensure the effects exist. Third, as the response rate was about 50%, a replication would be useful using other methods to approach potential participants. Fourth, the relative lack of anonymity may have enhanced socially desirable responding. However, it seems unlikely that this can explain our major findings. For instance, if anything, it might be socially undesirable to admit as a 60-year-old man that one fantasizes about much younger women. Fifth, as this is not a longitudinal study, one might argue that cohort rather than age effects might be responsible for the results. We do not think that this is very likely. If anything, there may now be a stronger emphasis on youth and attractiveness than there was in the time that the older men in the present sample grew up (although we have no empirical reason to attribute any causal power to such emphases). Moreover, given the major changes in women's roles in the past decades, it would seem difficult to explain why there are no differences in preferences of women of various cohorts. Finally, strictly speaking, it has not yet been demonstrated that our findings are specific to mating or that they represent more general interpersonal preferences. Nevertheless, we feel that our findings suggest that men and women differ in consistent ways in the age preferences for potential mates as they grow older. Preferences untainted by pragmatic considerations support the sex difference in attraction towards fertility cues posited by the life history mode. As logic and previous theory would dictate, expressed sex differences in preferences for long-term partners suggest that other constraints are weighted in such decisions.

References

- Buunk, B. P., Kenrick, D. T., Nieuwenboer, S., & Lockwood, S. (1996). *Gender differences in the age of a spouse: evidence from three centuries in The Netherlands*. Paper presented at the 8th International Conference on Personal Relationships, Banff, Canada, July.

- Byrne, D. (1971). *The attraction paradigm*. New York: Academic Press.
- Eagly, A., & Wood, W. (1999). The origins of sex differences in human behavior: evolved dispositions versus social roles. *American Psychologist*, *54*, 408–423.
- Einon, D. (1997). Individual differences in age preferences in mates: taking a closer look. *Behavioral and Brain Sciences*, *20*, 137–138.
- Ellis, B. J., & Symons, D. (1990). Sex differences in sexual fantasy: an evolutionary psychological approach. *Journal of Sex Research*, *27*, 527–555.
- Harpending, H. (1992). Age differences between mates in Southern African pastoralists. *Behavioral and Brain Sciences*, *15*, 102–103.
- Kenrick, D. K., & Keefe, R. C. (1992). Age preferences in mates reflect sex human reproductive strategies. *Behavioral and Brain Sciences*, *15*, 75–133.
- Kenrick, D. T., Gabrielidis, C., Keefe, R. C., & Cornelius, J. S. (1996). Adolescents' age preferences for dating partners: support for an evolutionary model of life-history strategies. *Child Development*, *67*, 1499–1511.
- Kenrick, D. T., & Keefe, R. C. (1997). Age preferences in mates: an even closer look without the distorted lenses. *Behavioral and Brain Sciences*, *20*, 140–143.
- Kenrick, D. T., Keefe, R. C., Bryan, A., Barr, A., & Brown, S. (1995). Age preferences and mate choice among homosexuals and heterosexuals. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *69*, 1166–1172.
- Otta, E., Queiroz, R. D. S., Campos, L. D. S., daSilva, M. W. D., & Silveira, M. T. (1999). Age differences between spouses in a Brazilian marriage sample. *Environment and Human Behavior*, *20*, 99–103.
- Rasmussen, J. L., Rajecki, D. W., Ebert, A. A., Lagler, K., Brewer, C., & Cochran, E. (1998). Age preferences in personal advertisements: two life history strategies or one matching tactic? *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*, *15*, 77–89.
- Walter, A. (1997). The evolutionary psychology of mate selection in Morocco — a multivariate analysis. *Human Nature*, *8*, 113–137.
- Wiederman, M. W. (1993). Evolved gender differences in mate preferences: evidence from personal advertisements. *Ethology and Sociobiology*, *14*, 331–352.