



# AGE VARIATION IN MATING STRATEGIES AND MATE PREFERENCES AMONG COLLEGE STUDENTS

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## BACKGROUND

### Variation between the sexes

Past research has documented systematic similarities and differences in men's and women's mate preferences and mating orientations (attitudes toward long-term partnerships and short-term sexual relationships).

Prominent between-sex similarities include a shared emphasis on finding a long-term partner, particularly one that is faithful and loving (Buss, 1989).

Prominent between-sex differences include men's greater emphasis on physical attractiveness and greater willingness to engage in short-term mating (Buss, 1989; Schmitt, 2005).

### Variation across ages

Relationship scientists currently know little about change over time in individuals' mating orientations and preferences.

Despite this lack of knowledge, college students do have consistent shared assumptions regarding their peers' mating strategies and preferences. According to one study, college students expect their peers to become less oriented toward opportunistic sex and physical appearance as they progress through college (Bleske-Rechek et al., 2009).

In this study we found support for many previous findings regarding between-sex similarities and differences. We also provided preliminary insight into age variation (and lack thereof) in mating strategies and preferences.

## METHOD

### Overview

We collected responses from a representative sample of undergraduate students (487 women, 267 male). Of these, 264 were in their freshman year, 140 were "mid-career" (sophomores and juniors), and 350 were approaching graduation (seniors and beyond). The mean age was 20.67 years ( $SD = 3.34$ ).

All participants completed measures of their attitudes toward both long- and short-term mating, experience with long- and short-term relationships, and preferred mate qualities.

### Mating Attitudes and Experiences

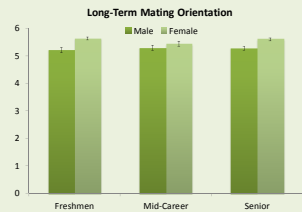
Participants completed Jackson and Kirkpatrick's (2007) measure of short-term and long-term mating orientation. They were also asked to report sexual activity, including number of long-term relationship partners (4 months or more), number of one-time sex partners ever, and number of sex partners in the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

### Mate Preferences

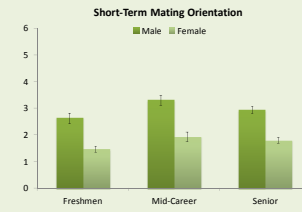
Participants completed a task in which they were allotted 50 "mate dollars" toward conceptualizing the ideal romantic partner. They distributed their limited mate dollar budget across the following characteristics: ambition, desire for children, emotional stability, faithfulness, intelligence, physical attractiveness, potential for financial success, sense of humor, similar values, and social popularity.

## RESULTS

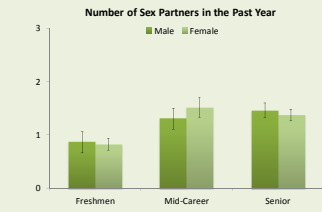
### MATE ATTITUDES: SHORT-TERM AND LONG-TERM MATING ORIENTATIONS AND EXPERIENCES



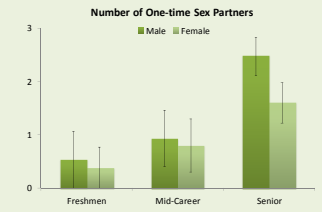
Across both sex and college status, long-term mating orientation was high ( $M = 5.47, SD = .78$ ). Women scored significantly higher than men did on long-term mating orientation,  $F(1,751) = 22.33, p < .001, \text{partial } \eta = .03$ . Post hoc comparisons showed that women are significantly higher than men at both freshman ( $p < .001$ ) and senior ( $p < .001$ ) levels but not at the mid-career level ( $p = .26$ ). Across sex, college status was not significantly associated with long-term mating orientation,  $F(2,751) = .49, p = .61, \text{partial } \eta = .001$ .



Men scored significantly higher than women did on short-term mating orientation,  $F(1,748) = 91.52, p < .001, \text{partial } \eta = .11$ . This sex difference was significant at each point in college (all  $ps < .001$ ). Across sex, college status was associated with short-term mating orientation,  $F(2,748) = 5.81, p = .003, \text{partial } \eta = .02$ . Freshmen were significantly lower in short-term mating orientation than both mid-career and senior students were (both  $ps < .001$ ). However, post hoc comparisons revealed that whereas freshman women were lower in STMO than both mid-career and senior women were (all  $ps < .03$ ), freshman men only differed from mid-career men ( $p = .01$ ) and not from seniors ( $p = .18$ ).

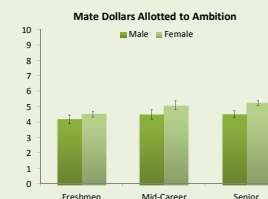
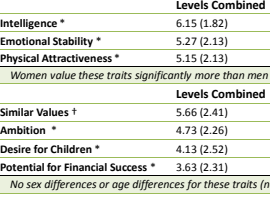
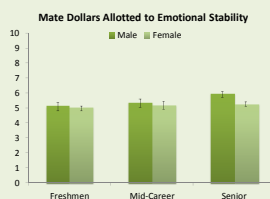
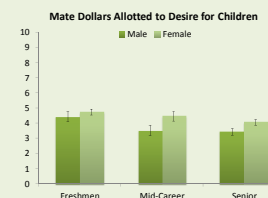
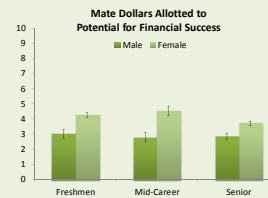
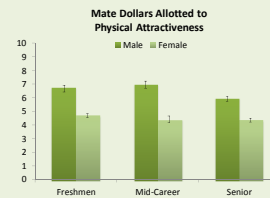
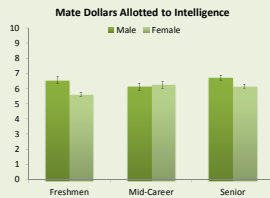


Sex was not significantly associated with reported number of sex partners in the past year,  $F(1,748) = .50, p = .48, \text{partial } \eta = .001$ . Pairwise comparisons confirmed there were no sex differences within any level of college status (all  $ps > .46$ ). However, college status was significantly associated with number of sex partners,  $F(2,748) = 8.23, p < .001, \text{partial } \eta = .02$ . Post hoc comparisons showed that seniors reported significantly higher number of sex partners than freshmen students did, both across sexes and within each sex (all  $ps < .03$ ). There were no differences between mid-career and senior students (all  $ps > .21$ ).



Sex was not significantly associated with reported number of sex partners in the past year,  $F(1,743) = 1.16, p = .28, \text{partial } \eta = .002$ . Pairwise comparisons confirmed there were no sex differences within any level of college status (all  $ps > .07$ ). However, college status was significantly associated with number of sex partners,  $F(2,743) = 9.21, p < .001, \text{partial } \eta = .02$ . Post hoc comparisons showed that seniors reported significantly more one-time sex partners than freshmen students did, both across sexes and within each sex (all  $ps < .034$ ). Among men, seniors also reported significantly more partners than mid-career students did ( $p = .02$ ).

### MATE PREFERENCES: AGE AND SEX VARIATION IN HOW STUDENTS SPEND THEIR "MATE DOLLARS"



Differences in college students' mate dollar allotments as a function of college level							
* Indicates significant differences among levels of college status. See corresponding graph for more information about this age variation.							
Men value these traits significantly more than women do, all $ps < .05$ (pictured left and above)							
	Levels Combined	Freshmen	Mid-Career	Seniors	df	F	p
Intelligence *	6.15 (1.82)	5.85 (1.69)	6.17 (1.90)	6.37 (1.86)	2	5.73	.003
Emotional Stability *	5.27 (2.13)	5.00 (1.96)	5.24 (2.39)	5.50 (2.13)	2	3.83	.02
Physical Attractiveness *	5.15 (2.13)	5.17 (2.05)	5.60 (2.26)	4.96 (2.13)	2	3.95	.02
Women value these traits significantly more than men do, all $ps < .05$ (pictured right and above)							
	Levels Combined	Freshmen	Mid-Career	Seniors	df	F	p
Similar Values †	5.66 (2.41)	5.63 (2.39)	5.42 (2.69)	5.79 (2.31)	2	1.06	.35
Ambition *	4.73 (2.26)	4.42 (2.09)	4.81 (2.51)	4.95 (2.32)	2	3.87	.02
Desire for Children *	4.13 (2.52)	4.64 (2.42)	4.00 (2.54)	3.79 (2.52)	2	8.34	.000
Potential for Financial Success *	3.63 (2.31)	3.93 (2.35)	3.72 (2.34)	3.36 (2.24)	2	4.33	.01
No sex differences or age differences for these traits (not pictured)							
	Levels Combined	Freshmen	Mid-Career	Seniors	df	F	p
Faithfulness †	7.88 (2.27)	8.06 (2.10)	7.86 (2.51)	7.73 (2.30)	2	1.46	.23
Sense of Humor †	5.77 (2.17)	5.73 (2.23)	5.87 (2.29)	5.75 (2.08)	2	.17	.84
Social Popularity †	1.73 (1.76)	1.74 (1.70)	1.50 (1.67)	1.81 (1.84)	2	1.33	.27

† Not displayed as a graph. Values in parentheses represent standard deviations.

## DISCUSSION

### Key Findings

Our data show many examples of systematic variation by sex and age in accordance with previous research. Overall, both sexes report a stronger orientation toward long-term mating ( $M = 5.47, SD = .78$ ) than toward short-term mating ( $M = 2.12, SD = 1.67$ ). Women were significantly higher in long-term mating orientation than men were, and an orientation toward short-term sexual relationships was more popular among men than among women.

Attitudes toward long-term mating did not vary with age. Also, only freshmen were unique in their attitude toward short-term relationships and their number of sex partners in the past year. These results suggest that after students fully enter the college

years – a time for sexual and romantic exploration (Arnett, 2000) – age is no longer a predictor of sexual attitudes or behaviors. Also, the age variation among students regarding the total one-time sex partners is to be expected due to the cumulative nature of the variable.

At every age, both men and women allotted more mate dollars to faithfulness than to any other characteristic. They also tended to allot the fewest dollars to social popularity. Men's allotments reflected a higher interest in physical attractiveness and emotional stability than women's did, whereas women's reflected a higher interest in ambition, potential for financial success, and desire for children than men's allotments did.

We did find that some traits are more valued by older students than by younger students, specifically intelligence, emotional stability, and ambition. These findings coincide with

the assumption that the mate preferences of emerging adults are maturing as they age (Bleske-Rechek, et al., 2009). The lower interest in physical attractiveness among senior students compared to mid-careers ( $p = .006$ ) also aligns with the belief that young adults become less interested in physical appearance as they age and (presumably) mature.

However, results are mixed. Desire for children was actually higher among freshmen than among mid-careers ( $p = .05$ ) and seniors ( $p < .001$ ), which does not support the assumption that emerging adults become more family-focused as they age.

### Limitations

It should be noted that these data are cross-sectional. Without longitudinal data, we cannot assume that these changes are due to individual growth or change as opposed to cohort effects, which could be operating in the current comparison.

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