



# Emerging Adults' Mating Orientations and Life Plans

Maria Vander Wyst, Eric Fuerstenberg, and April Bleske-Rechek  
University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire



## Overview

### Background

Research on human mating in the 1980s (Buss, 1985, 1989; Buss & Barnes, 1986) spurred a wave of consistent findings on human mate preferences and mating desires.

- First, men and women place similar value on kindness, love, intelligence, and emotional stability in a long-term mate (Buss, 1989).
- Second, despite their similarities, men and women differ in the extent to which they value certain characteristics in a long-term mate: On average, men value physical attractiveness more than women do, and women value the potential for financial success more than men do (Buss, Shackelford, Kirkpatrick, & Larsen, 2001; Kenrick, Sadalla, Groth, & Trost, 1990).
- Third, men consistently report more favorable attitudes toward casual sex and devote more effort toward short-term sexual relationships than women do (Jackson & Kirkpatrick, 2007; Schmitt, 2005).

Relationships scientists, however, currently know very little about change over time in individuals' desires and preferences. In an initial attempt to address this gap, Bleske-Rechek, VandenHeuvel, & Vander Wyst (2009) documented two effects in a cross-sectional design:

- First, college students believe that mating desires change over the college years; specifically, students believe that their peers become more long-term oriented and less short-term oriented, and more focused on personality and less focused on outward appearances, as they go through college.
- Second, older college students and younger college students did not actually differ in their mate preferences or relationship desires, such as their interest in short-term sexual opportunities.

We designed a longitudinal study to provide a straightforward test of the hypothesis that individuals' relationship desires, as well as their perceptions of marriage and family, change over the college years.

### Study Overview

In this poster we describe the results of Phase I of a planned three-year longitudinal study. During the 2009-2010 academic year, we collected responses from 344 undergraduates enrolled in a 100-level general education course. In addition to measures of their mating orientations and mate preferences, students reported on a variety of plans for the future (as applicable): age of anticipated marriage and child rearing, number of children desired, desired salary and education, and work plans before and after children. We describe men's and women's responses to these measures and speculate how response patterns might differ when we assess them in three years.

## Method

### Sample

We recruited students from a 100-level GE course. Of an original 344 students, we omitted data from six who reported a homosexual orientation, leaving 243 women, 91 men, and 4 of unstated sex. Of the 338 undergraduates, the majority (77%) were freshmen. The mean age for male participants = 18.69, and for female participants = 18.44.

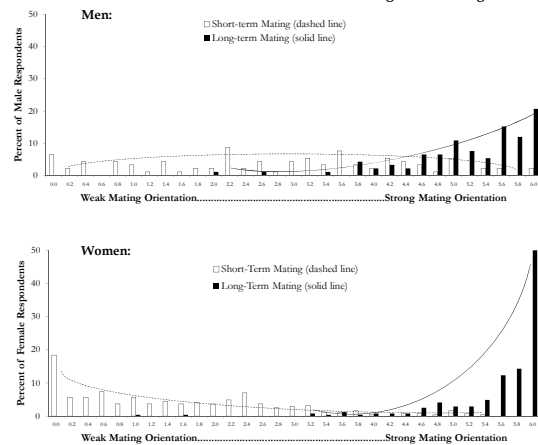
### Measures

As part of a broader questionnaire, participants provided basic demographic information. They also reported their aspired education level; how many hours they want to work per week upon completing their education; whether they want to get married someday (yes, no, unsure) and if so at what age; and whether they want to have children some day (yes, no, unsure) and if so at what age and how many. Those who reported a desire to have children also reported how many hours they want to work per week and how many hours they want their partner to work per week when they have young children at home. For the three questions involving number of work hours per week, response options were given in 10-hour increments (e.g., 20-29), ranging from the lowest of <10 to 80+.

Participants also completed a relationship section, which assessed their short-term mating orientation (5 items,  $\alpha = .92$ ) and their long-term mating orientation (5 items,  $\alpha = .83$ ). Sample short-term mating orientation items include "I could enjoy sex with someone I find highly desirable even if that person does not have long-term potential" and "I could easily imagine myself enjoying one night of sex with someone I would never see again." Sample long-term mating orientation items include "I hope to have a romantic relationship that lasts the rest of my life" and "Finding a long-term romantic partner is not important to me (rev)." All mating orientation items were completed with a 7-point response scale (disagree strongly to agree strongly).

## Results

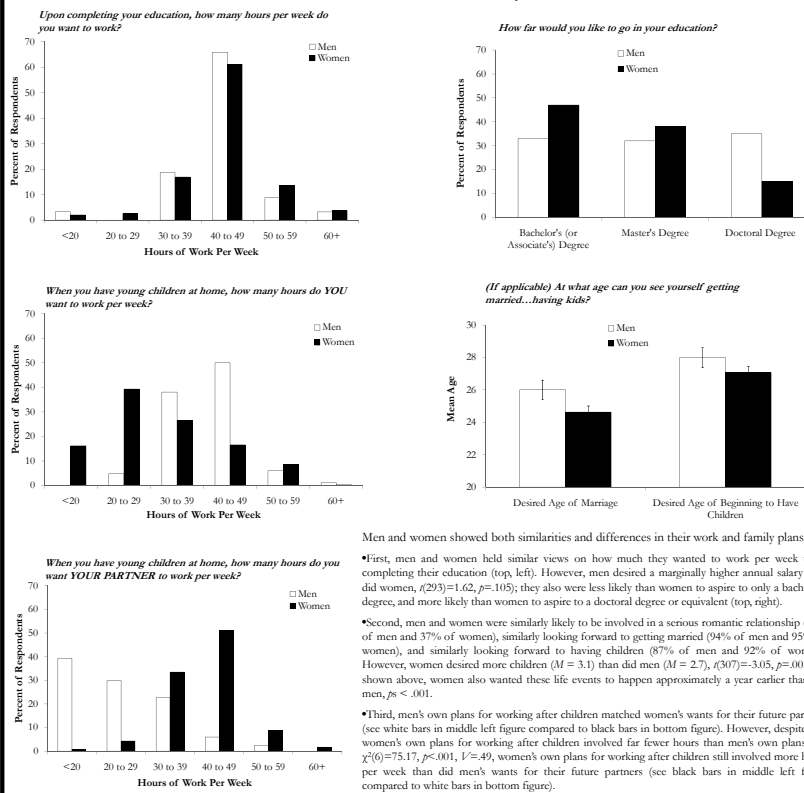
### Men's and Women's Short-term and Long-term Mating Orientation Score Distributions



Three findings are displayed in the two figures at left:

- First, as represented by the black bars being farther to the right compared to the white bars, both men and women hold much stronger interest in committed, long-term relationships than they do in short-term sexual relationships (male  $d = 1.18$ , female  $d = 2.38$ ).
- Second, as represented by a comparison of the distribution of black bars for men and the distribution of black bars for women, the young women in the sample have a stronger interest in committed, long-term romantic relationships than do the young men ( $d = 70$ ).
- Third, as represented by a comparison of the distribution of white bars for men and the distribution of white bars for women, the young men in the sample have a much stronger interest in short-term sexual relationships than do the young women ( $d = 1.15$ ).

### Men's and Women's Work and Family Plans



Men and women showed both similarities and differences in their work and family plans:

- First, men and women held similar views on how much they wanted to work per week upon completing their education (top, left). However, men desired a marginally higher annual salary than did women, ( $t(293)=1.62, p=.105$ ); they also were less likely than women to aspire to only a bachelor's degree, and more likely than women to aspire to a doctoral degree or equivalent (top, right).
- Second, men and women were similarly likely to be involved in a serious romantic relationship (34% of men and 37% of women), similarly looking forward to getting married (94% of men and 95% of women), and similarly looking forward to having children (87% of men and 92% of women). However, women desired more children ( $M = 3.11$ ) than did men ( $M = 2.7$ ),  $t(307)=-3.05, p=.003$ . As shown above, women also wanted these life events to happen approximately a year earlier than did men,  $p < .001$ .
- Third, men's own plans for working after children matched women's wants for their future partners (see white bars in middle left figure compared to black bars in bottom figure). However, despite that women's own plans for working after children involved far fewer hours than men's own plans did,  $\chi^2(6)=75.17, p < .001, V=.49$ , women's own plans for working after children still involved more hours per week than did men's wants for their future partners (see black bars in middle left figure compared to white bars in bottom figure).

## Discussion

In this first phase of a planned longitudinal study designed to track men and women through college, we found a number of similarities between the men and women in our sample – but also a number of systematic (and relatively large) differences. We documented the following effects:

- A stronger short-term mating orientation among men than among women
- A stronger long-term mating orientation among women than among men
- Similar desire by men and women for marriage and children, with age of those plans paralleling the mean ages of marriage and children for men and women in the U.S. today ([www.census.gov](http://www.census.gov))
- A large difference in desired hours per week spent working when young children are in the home, with women in the sample desiring fewer work hours compared to men in the sample
- A confluence between men's and women's perceptions of men's work hours with young children in the home, but a discrepancy between their perceptions of women's hours, with men's plans for their partners involving fewer hours of work per week than women's own plans do

We acknowledge that our emerging adult males and females could only offer us their preferences as they see them or were willing to report them. We do not know the causes of their preferences or the stability of those preferences, but research in behavioral genetics has documented substantial stability and heritability of other individual differences attributes, including general cognitive ability, interest in working with people versus things, and religiosity and political attitudes (Plomin, DeFries, McClearn, & McGuffin, 2000). It thus would not be surprising to find stability in men's and women's mating desires and family plans, particularly in light of the links between mating desires and personality traits, which themselves are moderately stable and heritable (Rowe, 1994).

Longitudinal research on similarly able intellectually precocious males and females, including research on emerging adult men and women in top 10 math/science graduate programs around the country followed over the course of their career, have documented effects that can help us forecast how our sample might respond three years from now (Lubinski & Benbow, 2000). In these intellectually able samples, the males are more likely to show an early-appearing and enduring singular focus on work and the females are more likely to favor a holistic perspective that emphasizes career as well as family and community. In fact, transitions to parenthood tend to be followed by increases in the disparate preferences the men and women hold (Ferriman, Lubinski, & Benbow, 2009). All that said, if our students' responses have more to do with preconceived notions about men and women than with enduring individual differences, then we should expect to see broad change three years from now after these students have been through an enlightening liberal arts education.

## Select References

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## Acknowledgments

This research is supported by a Summer Research Experience for Undergraduates (SREU) grant from the Office of Research and Sponsored Programs at UWEC. We thank Bailey VandenHeuvel and Megan Risdal for help with study design and data collection.