

## **Mate Selection in Heterosexual Relationships: A Study of Gender Differentiation among Students in Greece**

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### **Abstract**

*The article discusses gender differentiation of mate selection criteria in heterosexual relationships, presenting the findings of a survey conducted in Greece among 77 students aged 19-29 who attend the Department of Social Work in the University of West Attica. The gender variable was the control variable for research cases and was used in the interpretation of the results. The results showed that in this particular group of educated young people differences in preferences in mate selection between men and women tend to be eliminated as a source of social development in the field of women's position and gender socialization.*

**Keywords:** mate preference, sex differences, spouse selection, gender roles.

### **1. Introduction**

Mate selection is an important process over time in people's lives. This is because to a large extent determines the normality or not of interpersonal relations, the creation of offspring or families and the continuation of human societies. On the other hand, it is a complex process where many different factors influence the formation of the criteria that the social subjects set for the choice of partner / spouse. It is an attractive field of research for scientists who have stepped up research over the past decades by fueling the scientific dialogue with new interesting facts. In an attempt to understand the process of choosing a mate we are confronted with basic questions about human nature and its interaction with human society. This article presents key points of theoretical models that seek to interpret the partner selection process. It also presents the results of a survey conducted among students in Greece regarding the criteria of gender differentiation in the mate selection process.

### **2. The theoretical framework in which social research is developed**

It is a fact that there is much research activity around the issue of mate choice, perhaps because there is a great need to understand human behavior and interpret the underlying motives of the reproduction of human society. So the rich research activity has offered an equally rich bibliography, and sciences such as genetics, psychology and sociology have dealt with the issue thoroughly. The gender factor appears to be decisive in interpreting partner selection criteria, as men and women appear to be differentiated in terms of features they seek or are attractive to their potential partners. Recently, two are the dominant perspectives in examining gender differentiation: evolutionary perspective and socio-structural perspective.

The evolutionary perspective proposes that men and women have evolved sex-specific cognitive mechanisms from primeval environments that cause them to differ psychologically, thereby predisposing them to behave and make decisions in a sexually differential manner (Shoemaker, 2007:35-36). The evolutionary theory in trying to interpret the partner selection criteria for both sexes refers to "parental investment". The "parental investment" model proposed by Trivers, in 1972 (in Shoemaker, 2007:36) states that males are mainly interested in intercourse and reproduction, and females in raising offspring. According to this model, a number of studies showing that female dominance doesn't affect the criteria that attract a man to a woman (Kenrick et. al, 1993:952). Buss (1989) has pointed intercultural universality in emphasis that women show in social status and wealth of men and the emphasis that men show on physical attractiveness of women. One reason for psychologists' renewed interest in gender differences in mate selection criteria has been the development of evolutionary explanations for human social behavior (Sprecher et al., 1994).

Evolutionary psychologists make clear predictions as to how men and women should differ in the traits they desire in a mate. They have pointed out that the strategies, that both men and women use in choosing partners enhance their reproductive success.

On the other hand, surveys show that there are many similarities in gender selection criteria, especially regarding personality (humor, social skills, honesty, etc.). Some social psychologists interpret the formation of relationships, among other things, exploiting the theory of social interaction. According to this model, influenced by the economic sciences, individuals are looking for the "best value" they can achieve in partner search. It is assumed that each social subject has a certain "value" in the mating market and depends on the degree of attributes it gathers, such as beauty, intelligence, attractiveness, wealth and social recognition. Therefore, according to this economic model, people with more social skills will have increasing demands from the person they choose to mate (Kenrick et. al, 1993).

Social structural perspective states that mate selection strategies are not necessarily based on evolved psychological dispositions; rather, they result from the contrasting social positions that men and women have historically occupied within society (Eagly & Wood, 1999). The social structural model refers to gender differences, bearing in mind that women have less power in society than men and have a lower socioeconomic status. In this context, women "exchange" the goods they have access to, i.e. their appearance, femininity and sexuality, in order to gain power held by men and financial resources to improve their socio-economic position. Recent research proposes that gender roles affect sex differences and similarities in mate preferences. Gender roles, are shaped by the unequal division of labor between men and women (Zentner, & Eagly, 2015). In traditional societies with remnants of a patriarchal structure the consequence of this is that the two sexes continue to experience social inequalities at the level of power and socio-economic resources with women being inferior to men, not only in the possession of power but also in the characteristics they are attributed to them socially through the description of their roles. Understanding gender reflects the level that society perceives the sexes and feeds the content of their social action. From this perspective, men and women's "strategies" for evolving partnerships (women must have access to resources to grow offspring and men must have access to fertile women) are controlled. An interesting survey conducted by researchers in University of York, U.K., had as a central research hypothesis that the influence of "evolutionary biases" on partner choice will be reduced proportionally to gender homogeneity at national level or gender equality (Zentner & Mitura, 2012). According to the results of this survey, the gender difference in partner choice provided by models of evolutionary psychology is higher in societies dominated by inequality between men and women and less in most societies where gender equality is a given. It is therefore argued that there are fewer differences between men and women as regards their preferences on the characteristics and abilities of their partner in societies where there is strong gender equality compared to those where there is less. Because the sense of gender equality reduces sex's differences in their choice of mate, these studies show that the "strategies" that men and women use to choose their partner may not be so hardcore, at least as scientists at first thought, without, of course, implying that evolutionary roots should be excluded altogether. As researchers also point out, the ability to change behaviors and attitudes relatively directly as a response to social change can be guided by an evolutionary program that rewards adaptability rather than inflexibility.

In conclusion, we could agree that both the evolutionary perspective and the social structural perspective contribute to the development of the theoretical model for human mate selection. Whereas the evolutionary perspective is important for its biological approach to mate selection strategies, the social structural perspective is crucial for its recognition of the differential impacts that society and cultural values can have on mate choices (Shoemaker, 2007:36).

### ***3. Current study - Methodology and participants***

In an effort to test the hypothesis that gender is an important variable in partner selection criteria, small-scale research was conducted on a specific population in Greece. It should be noted that the country lacks research on this subject, although they might have been particularly interesting due to the recent socio-economic changes that have occurred. Greece is a country of the European South, which follows the patterns of western culture with significant delays in achieving gender equality. On the other hand, it is a country based on the functioning of the traditional family, which has a decisive impact on the development of gender standards.

Also, in recent years, apart from the economic crisis affecting the country, Greece has received the consequences of the refugee crisis, serving as a host country, and since the 1990s it has been a host country for economic migrants from the countries of the former Soviet Union. Considering these characteristics of the country, we believe that scientific research should be developed in the field to enrich the scientific dialogue on the influence of social factors on the mate selection.

The present study was addressed to male and female students of the Department of Social Work in University of Western Attica, who during the spring semester 2018 attended the Lab “Sociology of family”. The students were single, in the age group 19-29 years and most of them belonged in the middle class. The number of participants was 77, of which 66 were women and 11 were men. This gender imbalance expresses their proportion in the particular department of the University as it is characterized by the great numerical superiority of women.

For the research needs, a questionnaire was created which included 25 characteristics that would work for participants as criteria for choosing a spouse / partner in heterosexual relationships. Respondents were asked to choose a criteria-list of features that included physical attributes, personality data, socio-economic status, and ethnicity, race, religious and political beliefs. The respondents were asked to assess the degree of importance of twenty-five traits in a potential mate, on the 5-point Likert type scale. They were then asked to state the degree of priority they would give to the selected criteria.

#### **4. Results**

The SPSS statistical analysis package (v.20) was used to process the results. The main research hypothesis tested was gender-based differentiation in partner choice, as it has been shown through previous research that this difference is real with women emphasizing the financial status of their companions and men in appearance. A second research case is linked to the fact that this gender differentiation will tend to decrease as there is progress in modern western societies in promoting gender equality and delivering new content to traditional stereotypes. Data processing resulted in the following results.

For women in the sample, some of the most important criteria for choosing a spouse / partner are: sexual attraction, intelligence, humor, affection, dynamism, family and child love, and employment. In contrast the least important criteria for women are nationality, political beliefs, older age and higher social status. A number of elements of personality, but also the appearance and sexual attraction seem to play an important role for men in the sample. Specifically, for men, some of the most important criteria for choosing a spouse / partner are sexual attraction, intelligence, humor, emotion and cultivation, tenderness and appearance. Less important criteria for them are better economic situation, younger age, race and ethnicity. One interest finding shows that criteria such as race and religious beliefs do not leave indifferent women, as respectively not leave indifferent men the political beliefs and the upper social status of their mates.

**Table 1: Degree of criteria’s importance by gender (absolute numbers)**

| Criteria                  | Women      | Men        |
|---------------------------|------------|------------|
|                           | Importance | Importance |
| Same nationality          | -39*       | -6         |
| Same race                 | -19        | -6         |
| Similar religion          | -21        | -4         |
| Similar political beliefs | -27        | -3         |
| Oder age                  | -27        | -5         |
| Younger age               | -23        | -7         |
| Similar educational level | +31**      | +4         |
| Have a job                | +44        | +5         |
| Better economic status    | -12        | -7         |
| Higher social status      | -24        | -5         |
| Looks                     | +36        | +7         |
| Sexual attraction         | +58        | +10        |
| Humour                    | +52        | +9         |
| Intelligence              | +54        | +9         |
| Emotional                 | +46        | +9         |

|                   |      |    |
|-------------------|------|----|
| Cultured          | +42  | +9 |
| Adventures        | +33  | +6 |
| Family man/woman  | +31  | +6 |
| Sociable          | +35  | +6 |
| Good reputation   | 0*** | -5 |
| Love family/ kids | +44  | +5 |
| Affectionate      | +51  | +7 |
| Protective        | +43  | +5 |
| Dynamic           | +50  | +6 |
| Generous          | +46  | +6 |

\* “-” symbolize very low / low importance

\*\* “+” symbolize very high / high importance

\*\*\*0= equal number of answers between positive and negative evaluation of certain criteria.

Respondents were also asked to rate the priority given to the traits they consider important for their / their partners. Therefore, according to the rating of the priority of characteristics: Women, from the very important criteria they have chosen to evaluate a future spouse, set high / very high priority in sexual attraction, intelligence, humor and dynamism. Also, affection, emotionality and employment remain a high priority for them. There is therefore a relationship between the two options, i.e. the criteria they consider to be very important and a very high priority. Worth mentioning is the criterion of the appearance, which is not considered especially important for women of the sample. However, it is considered to be a high priority when it participates in the selection criteria.

In the case of men, sexual attraction, intelligence, emotionality, appearance and humor seems not only to be very important criteria, but also to a high degree of priority. Consequently, for men participants, there is a relationship between the two options, i.e. the criteria they consider as very important and a very high priority. Here, it is worth mentioning the criterion of racial similarity, which is not considered particularly important for men in the sample, but gathers high priority when participates in the selection criteria.

**Table 2: Gender selection criteria very high / high importance and very high / high priority (absolute numbers)**

| Criteria                  | Women      |          | Men        |          |
|---------------------------|------------|----------|------------|----------|
|                           | Importance | Priority | Importance | Priority |
| Same nationality          | 0          | 7        | 0          | 1        |
| Same race                 | 20         | 7        | 3          | 7        |
| Similar religion          | 20         | 15       | 4          | 4        |
| Similar political beliefs | 19         | 12       | 2          | 3        |
| Oder age                  | 9          | 7        | 1          | 0        |
| Younger age               | 7          | 1        | 4          | 0        |
| Similar educational level | 31         | 16       | 4          | 5        |
| Have a job                | 44         | 32       | 5          | 3        |
| Better economic status    | 10         | 10       | 0          | 0        |
| Higher social status      | 7          | 6        | 2          | 0        |
| Looks                     | 36         | 41       | 7          | 7        |
| Sexual attraction         | 58         | 58       | 10         | 10       |
| Humour                    | 52         | 44       | 9          | 7        |
| Intelligence              | 54         | 50       | 9          | 9        |
| Emotional                 | 46         | 38       | 9          | 9        |
| Cultured                  | 42         | 30       | 9          | 10       |
| Adventures                | 33         | 27       | 6          | 5        |
| Family man/woman          | 31         | 14       | 6          | 5        |
| Sociable                  | 35         | 25       | 6          | 4        |
| Good reputation           | 16         | 5        | 2          | 0        |
| Love family/ kids         | 44         | 29       | 5          | 4        |
| Affectionate              | 51         | 39       | 7          | 6        |
| Protective                | 43         | 36       | 5          | 6        |
| Dynamic                   | 50         | 41       | 6          | 5        |
| Generous                  | 46         | 29       | 6          | 4        |

$p < 0,01 - 0,05$

## **5. Discussion**

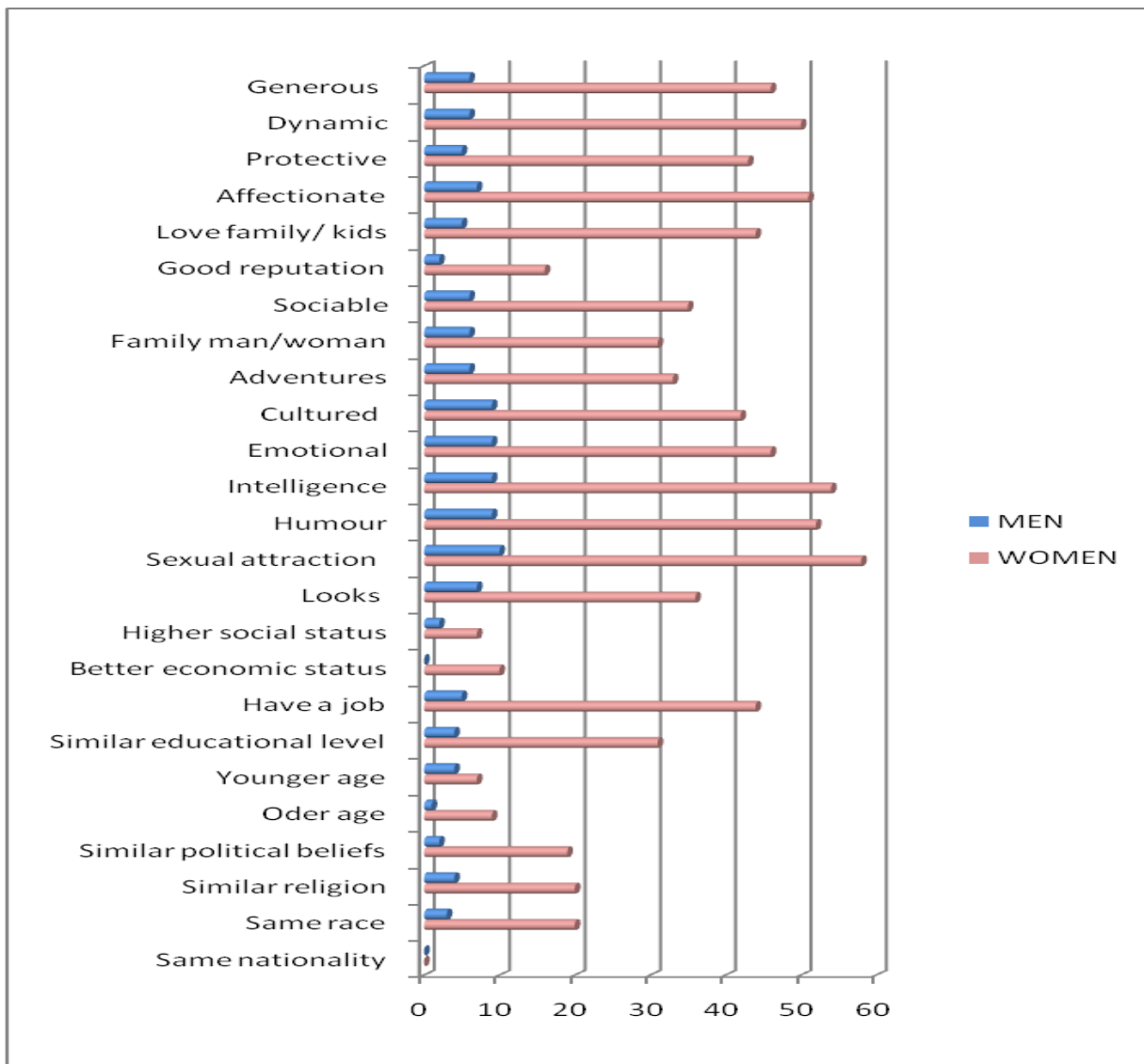
The research shows that the two genders present more similarities than differences in the criteria they consider important for choosing a partner, especially when it involves serious commitment and long-term relationships, as has been shown in other studies (Kenrick et al., 1990). Features such as sexual attraction and appearance, as well as personality details such as intelligence, humor, affection and emotion are recorded as very important and of high priority for men and women.

On the contrary, neither gender considers the age of a partner as an important criterion, which contradicts several studies that confirm evolutionary theory and want men to look for young and attractive companions unlike women who invest in others criteria (Pérusse, 1994, Buss, 1989). The present study showed a small preference of women in older males and a slight preference of men in younger mates, but without this criterion having a high priority for either sex. This finding seems to be in line with the findings of a recent Finnish survey, according to which women show a slight preference for older men and men prefer younger women not when they are young but as they grow older (Antfolk, 2017: 1) and without necessarily leading to sexual activity.

On the other hand, worthy of reference is the differentiation of the two genders in the partner's employment criterion, hence its financial adequacy. Thus, women in the sample appear to attach great importance to the criterion of employment for their partner compared to men. Employment is an element of a person's socio-economic status and implies financial autonomy, independence, and social classification based on income. On the other hand, it accompanies the power that a person can have in a society, but also his ability to cope with the financial requirements of family and child care. At this point, the research confirms findings from other studies fueled by evolutionary theory, as well as modern research which, unlike the social structural model, points out that the more the socio-economic status of women increases, the more their demands are increased (Todosijević, Ljubinković, Arančić, 2003; Townsend, 1989), even in terms of their attractiveness or intelligence and education (Atari & Jamali, 2016).

Women and men who participated in this study are young, highly educated people, belonging mostly to the middle class. It is very much expected when they themselves have relatively high personal status to set high standards for their mates as well. Especially on the issue of education, mostly women, are investing significantly. Thus, participants attach great importance to the education of their mate, which they prefer to be similar to theirs. This finding is consistent with recent research documenting the importance attached, particularly women, in the educational level of their partners (Whyte, Chan, Torgler, 2018).

Also, a number of criteria relating to nationality, race, religion and political belief seem not to be of particular concern to the two genders, but they do not leave some participants totally indifferent. For example, women in the sample attach more importance to the similarity of race and men to religious beliefs (with a relatively high degree of priority). In relation to the interpretation of the race criterion, Sprecher, Sullivan, Hatfield (1994) attribute the differences in gender socialization and the pressures on young girls in particular to follow the rules of endogamy. Regarding religious beliefs men's preference may be linked to the role of women in the relationship / family and parenting.



**Figure 1: Gender differentiation in the importance of partner selection criteria (very important / important).**

## 6. Limitations of the Current Study

Some limitations of the present study are worth noting. The present sample was drawn from university settings in Greece and surely not reflects attitudes of all young people (aged 19-29) in Greece. It is recommended for future research to contact similar researches in diverse samples in terms of education, socio-economic status, language, and subcultures. Also, in contemporary research, the criteria for choosing a mate in same-sex couples should be taken into account, as relevant studies are absent (see indicatively, Whyte, Chan, Torgler, 2018).

Another very important parameter to be considered in future research is self evaluation of the individuals and its possible connection with the traits both sexes looking for in an ideal partner. As previous studies have shown (Tadinac, Hromatko, 2007) the higher the ratings of self evaluation of individuals, the more demanding they are from their future partner setting high standards. It seems that individuals are targeting what they can achieve based on their own qualifications and adjust their requirements and preferences according to what they think they can achieve in real life.

Increasingly, in modern surveys, data suggesting that there are more similarities than differences between sexes in partner selection. Future research would be useful to explore the meaning that the two genders attach to different concepts.

For example, as Li and Kenrick (2006) reported, physical attractiveness in a mate is found to mean somewhat different things to a man and a woman. Understanding these similarities and differences depends on carefully distinguishing the questions of what people are looking for in mates for different levels of involvement. Therefore future research should take into account both the meaning performance in the characteristics of a mate by gender and the type of relationship /the level of commitment.

## **7. Conclusions**

In this research two hypotheses were tested: The first hypothesis is connected with the findings of various studies mentioned in the differentiation of the sexes as to the desirable characteristics of their mates, in which women give more importance to employment and income, and men to physical attractiveness and age. This hypothesis stems from the evolutionary and social structural model; as it seems evolutionary forces affect socialization and stereotypes for both sexes.

The data of this research partly confirm this hypothesis, at least with regard to women and the emphasis on the employment of their mate. On the other hand, however, there was no significant gender differentiation in terms of physical appearance and age. Gender non-differentiation on the issue of mate's income may also be related to the young age of the survey participants (19-29 years). Other surveys in the past have shown that in the young age groups, both men and women were fairly willing to marry someone who earned less than they (and men were slightly more willing than women). One interpretation may be related to the distance that seems to separate this age from the age of childbearing, where women 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 (Sprecher, Sullivan, Hatfield, 1994).

The second research hypothesis is linked to the fact that possible variations of both sexes on the traits they consider most attractive in a mate will tend to decrease as there is progress in modern Western societies in promoting gender equality and delivering new content to traditional stereotypes. It is a fact that in the countries of western culture there have been changes, not to the same extent for all, concerning the position of woman in social life and work and the right of equality between sexes has been recognized. So the past few decades, women have increased their social power in the labor market, enhance their skills through high participation in higher education and claim more public place than in the past, were was exclusively men's field of action. Slowly, the stereotype for both sexes and the way in which society perceives and implies social roles is changing. Along with this change and the new role that modern woman imagines for herself, the patterns of relationships change, as well as the modern people's view of relationships and family. In modern world, young people are investing resources in their careers and improving their individual status, and this is now also the case for women who have traditionally were seeking their lost power through the men they married. Young, educated people pursue their personal development, not easily committed to long term relationships and prolong the age at which they decide to have a family and children. Also, as very well has been reported in Tzamalouka et al. (2010), in modern societies family is not "the destination of the individual", nor is the child the reason for its existence. Today, emphasis is put on the formation of a good relationship and communication between the couple. Family not only serves the purpose of the biological and social survival of their members but their psycho-emotional and social development.

As a result of these changes, one would expect that the characteristics that one gender looks for in the other are also different, especially if we consider that the social structural model prevails evolutionary model in mate choice. In this research, indeed the differences between men and women tend to disappear in a series of criteria that have to do with the physical appearance and personality of the ideal partner. So both genders have evaluated very positively criteria such as sexual attraction, intelligence, humor, culture and education, sociability, etc. On the contrary, criteria related to the socio-economic status, such as income, are of lesser importance and priority for both genders, with the exception of the importance women attach to the employment of their mates. So in this research, as well as in the research of Todosijević et al. (2003), participants seem to be concerned first with finding a partner with whom they could develop and maintain a satisfying interpersonal relationship. We could therefore say that both sexes seeking for internal quality characteristics in their relationship that will enable and contribute to their self-completion. What remains to be seen in future research is whether despite the social changes and the elimination of patriarchy men and women will 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 (Sprecher, Sullivan, Hatfield, 1994). On the other hand, gender differences in mate selection preferences could narrow in the years to come, and as gender gaps are reduced, equal opportunities for women and men are presented and it changes the social content attributed to gender roles in the family and society.

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