

Age Preferences for Same- and Opposite-Sex Partners

ANDREW F. HAYES
Department of Psychology
Cornell University

ABSTRACT. Preferences for age of partners of heterosexual and homosexual men and women were investigated. Personal advertisements were collected from newspapers in the United States and analyzed for the difference between the age of the advertiser and the age of the preferred partner. Heterosexual men tended to seek women younger than themselves, whereas women sought partners near their own age or older. The preferences of homosexual men and women were similar to those of heterosexuals, although more homosexuals stated a preference for a partner younger than themselves.

NUMEROUS ILLUSTRATIONS in the social psychology literature suggest that similar people tend to gravitate toward one another. Friends and romantic partners may be similar along many dimensions, including ethnicity, religion, attractiveness, socioeconomic status, intelligence, attitudes, and a host of other psychological characteristics (Buss, 1985). Age of partner, however, is an exception to this similarity tendency.

An abundance of studies have shown that men seem to prefer young women as sexual and romantic partners, whereas women prefer men near their own age or older (e.g., Buss, 1989; Kenrick & Keefe, 1992). Although most of the data reflect the preferences of American men and women, there is evidence that this phenomenon is not limited to the United States. Buss (1989), for example, reported current evidence for this pattern of age preferences in 33 different countries representing a diversity of cultures, ethnicities, religious and political affiliations, and economic groups. Kenrick and Keefe (1992) also found this same pattern in samples from Germany, Holland, India, and Poro (a small island in the

I am grateful to Laura Betzig, Richard Darlington, and Dennis Regan for their comments on earlier versions of this article.

Address correspondence to Andrew F. Hayes, Department of Psychology, Cornell University, Uris Hall, Ithaca, NY 14853.

South Pacific). This gender difference is so robust that it appears regardless of whether age preferences are extracted from self-report measures (Buss, 1989), marriage statistics (Buss, 1989; Kenrick & Keefe, 1992; Paterson & Pettijohn, 1982), or newspaper advertisements (e.g., Cameron, Oskamp, & Sparks, 1977; Harrison & Saeed, 1977; Kenrick & Keefe, 1992). The difference manifests itself in marriage choices throughout the 20th century (Buss, 1989; Kenrick & Keefe, 1992; Paterson & Pettijohn, 1982).

Social psychologists have tended to attribute these differences to gender differences in the social desirability of physical attractiveness and status or resource possession. The age preferences commonly found may simply be an epiphenomenon of gender differences. Some evidence indicates that men regard physical attractiveness as more important in a partner than do women (Buss, 1989; Buss & Barnes, 1986; Cameron et al., 1977; Davis, 1990; Harrison & Saeed, 1977; Howard, Blumstein, & Schwartz, 1987; Hoyt & Hudson, 1981; Nevid, 1984). As Buss (1989) reported, this gender difference in the value placed on physical attractiveness is not restricted to Americans. A physically attractive partner can have beneficial self-presentational effects for the man as well: Men with physically attractive female partners are often evaluated more favorably than those with less attractive partners (Bar-Tal & Saxe, 1976; Sigall & Landy, 1973). Young women may tend to be preferred over older women because men tend to judge younger women as more attractive than older ones (Deutsch, Zalenski, & Clark, 1986; Mathes, Brennan, Haugen, & Rice, 1985).

Older men might tend to be preferred by women because increased age is associated with power, ability to provide resources, status, and financial assets. Studies indicate that women in many cultures do in fact state a greater preference than men for a partner who is established, educated, able to provide, ambitious, or otherwise a good financial prospect (Buss, 1989; Buss & Barnes, 1986; Davis, 1990; Feingold, 1992; Gonzales & Meyers, 1993; Harrison & Saeed, 1977; Howard et al., 1987; Kenrick, Sadalla, Groth, & Trost, 1990). All these qualities seem more likely to be found in men advanced in age.

A different account of this pattern of preferences is based on evolutionary processes. Kenrick and Keefe (1992) suggested that the mate selection process is based "not on arbitrary norms but on the hard currency of biological fitness and reproductive value" (p. 77). One tenet of Darwinian evolution that underlies some sociobiological theories is that genetically determined characteristics of individuals with high reproductive fitness come to dominate the gene pool. As a woman ages, her ability to successfully reproduce decreases. Throughout the course of evolution, men who sought women who showed evidence of youth and hence fertility may have had a reproductive advantage over men who preferred and mated with older women (cf. Cunningham, 1986; Symons, 1979). In contrast, since biological factors constrain both the number of children a woman can produce in her lifetime and the activities she can engage in while pregnant, women who sought men who were able to provide resources that increased the likelihood

of reproductive success may have had a selective advantage throughout evolution. Such resources include food, shelter, and protection from enemies, as well as traits associated with the ability to provide, such as ambitiousness, industriousness, dominance, and in modern times, education and earning capacity—characteristics more likely to be found in older men in the population. Detailed accounts of this complex evolutionary argument are discussed by Buss (1987), Kenrick and Keefe (1992), and Symons (1979).

Symons (1979) and Kenrick and Keefe (1992) proposed that data on the preferences of homosexuals may shed some light on the origins of these patterns. To date, no study has provided an unequivocal analysis of these patterns. Some data suggest that homosexual men show a preference for both youth and similarity (Harry, 1983, 1984; Harry & DeVall, 1978). However, the investigators in those studies forced respondents to indicate their age preference in one of several large age clusters (e.g., “younger than myself” or “20–25”). The data on heterosexuals show that age differences of partners are often less than 5 years. Thus, interesting age differences might have been masked in these studies. Differences in data-collection methods also make it difficult to compare these findings with those reported for heterosexuals.

In the present study I attempted (a) to replicate previous research on opposite-sex age preferences while increasing the geographical areas sampled and (b) to assess, using a methodology that renders the groups directly comparable, whether homosexuals display age preferences similar to or different from those of heterosexuals. Although the study was not designed as a test of the two theories presented previously, the results can be used to enrich the discussion and debate.

Method

The data were obtained from personal advertisements appearing in 29 publications throughout the United States and (in one case) Canada. Numerous investigators have used personal advertisements as a source of information about mate preferences (e.g., Gonzales & Meyers, 1993; Harrison & Saeed, 1977). Some of the publications were newspapers; others were local publications containing stories about local people and events, theater listings, restaurant reviews, and so forth. All advertisements were published in late 1992 or early 1993.

A total of 5,209 advertisements were found. To be included in the analysis, however, an advertisement had to meet three criteria: The advertiser had to state in the advertisement (a) his or her present and precise age (ages such as “mid-30s” were not acceptable), (b) the precise minimum and maximum age of the desired partner (again, ambiguous age ranges were not acceptable), and (c) his or her own sex and the sex of the desired partner. This selection procedure yielded 1,464 codable advertisements (28%). Fifty-six percent (813) of the advertisements were from periodicals published in the following cities: Boston, Buffalo, Chicago, Miami, New Orleans, New York, San Francisco, San Jose, Syracuse,

and Toronto. The remaining advertisements came from smaller cities, mostly in the northeastern United States. Advertisers in the four groups (male or female, heterosexual or homosexual) differed in age, $F(3, 1459) = 13.20, p < .0001$. The heterosexual advertisers were older than the homosexual ones (34.4 vs. 31.3 yrs., respectively, $p < .001$), and the gay men were older than the lesbians (31.9 vs. 27.9 yrs., respectively, $p < .01$).

The advertisers' age preferences were operationalized as the midpoint between the minimum and maximum acceptable age indicated in the advertisement (i.e., $[\text{Min} + \text{Max}]/2$). A difference score was calculated by subtracting each advertiser's age from this age preference score, a negative score therefore reflecting a preference for a partner younger than self. This difference score served as the main dependent variable in the analysis.

Results

A regression model predicting the age difference score was created by regressing it on gender of advertiser, sexual orientation, age, and all possible interactions, with all regressors entered simultaneously. Because the three-way interaction was not significant ($p > .8$), it was removed and a new model was calculated. One case (a 41-year-old homosexual woman) was identified as unduly influential, as measured by Cook's distance and *dfbeta* values (Darlington, 1990), and it was discarded before a final model was calculated. No effects were created or lost by deleting her data. The final model, moreover, fit the data better than did the model that included this case and was also highly significant, $F(6, 1456) = 249.75, p < .0001, R^2 = .50, \text{root MSE} = 3.82$. The omnibus regression model predicting the difference between the age of the advertiser and the preferred partner was as follows: difference = $8.62 - 2.46(\text{gender}) + 5.85(\text{orientation}) - 0.35(\text{age}) + 0.26(\text{gender} \times \text{age}) - 0.16(\text{orientation} \times \text{age}) - 2.76(\text{gender} \times \text{orientation})$. (Gender was coded as 0 = male, 1 = female; orientation was coded as 0 = heterosexual, 1 = homosexual.)

The tendency of males to seek a younger partner and of females to seek an older partner was clearly present (see Table 1). As shown by a significant interaction between gender and age within the heterosexual group ($b = 0.26, SE = 0.023, p < .001$), the male advertisers preferred women who were younger, whereas the women generally sought older partners. This interaction can also be interpreted as a 0.26-year increase in the gender difference with each 1-year increase in the age of the advertiser. The absence of a three-way interaction indicates that this increase in the gender difference was also present among homosexual advertisers. Like the heterosexual men, the older gay men showed more of a preference for younger partners than the younger men showed. In contrast, the lesbians showed less preference for older partners than the heterosexual women did. This interaction between gender and age within the homosexual group was also significant ($b = 0.27, SE = 0.125, p < .03$).

TABLE 1
Difference Between Age of Advertiser and Age of Preferred Partner

Advertiser	Age of advertiser (years)											
	18	20	25	30	35	40	45	50	55	60	65	70
Men seeking women (<i>n</i> = 800)	2.32	1.62	-0.13	-1.88	-3.63	-5.38	-7.13	-8.88	-10.63	-12.38	-14.13	-15.88
Women seeking men (<i>n</i> = 405)	4.54	4.36	3.91	3.46	3.01	2.56	2.11	1.66	1.21	0.76	0.31	
Men seeking men (<i>n</i> = 217)	5.29	4.27	1.72	-0.83	-3.38	-5.93	-8.48	-11.03	-13.58	-16.13		
Women seeking women (<i>n</i> = 41)	4.75	4.25	3.00	1.75	0.50	-0.75	-2.00					

Note. A negative value reflects a preference for a partner younger than self. Data derived from the regression model. An empty cell indicates no data available.

Several significant effects involving sexual orientation emerged. A significant interaction between orientation and age indicates that for both men and women, increased age was associated with an increased preference for a younger partner, but this increase was larger for homosexuals than for heterosexuals ($b = -0.16$, $SE = 0.036$, $p < .0001$). In addition, there was a significant interaction between sexual orientation and gender ($b = -2.76$, $SE = 0.72$, $p < .0002$). Although there were clear gender differences in age preferences among heterosexual and homosexual advertisers, this interaction indicates that regardless of the age of the advertiser, this difference was smaller for the homosexual groups than for the heterosexual groups: the homosexual men and women had more similar age preferences than the heterosexual men and women did.

Finally, there was a strong correlation between age of the advertiser and age of the preferred partner: men seeking women, $r = .83$; women seeking men, $r = .94$; women seeking women, $r = .86$, men seeking men, $r = .54$ (all $ps < .0001$). Furthermore, between 75% (gay men) and 90% (lesbians) of all advertisers included their own age within the minimum and maximum age desired in a partner.

Discussion

In this study the heterosexual men stated a preference for younger women, and the heterosexual women seemed to prefer men near their own age or older, as other researchers have shown. One exception to this trend was the preference of the young heterosexual men: those under 25 years old tended to prefer someone older than themselves, mean difference = 1.37 years, $SD = 3.16$, $t(37) = 3.81$, $p < .001$. This finding is consistent with data reported by Kenrick and Keefe (1992), and it provides additional evidence for their argument (based on evolution theory) that young heterosexual men should prefer women slightly older than themselves because women in their early 20s are generally more fertile than women in their early or middle teens.

The preference patterns of the homosexuals and the heterosexuals were not identical; however, their similarity is striking. An evolutionary explanation for this finding could be that human biology places obvious constraints on persons with whom one can reproduce (i.e., someone of the opposite sex). If it is assumed that genetic predisposition plays some role in eventual expression of homosexuality (see Bailey & Pillard, 1991; Bem, 1993; Fausto-Sterling, 1992; and Whitam, Diamond, & Martin, 1993, for various arguments favoring and opposing this assumption), it seems reasonable that a homosexual genotype may have been subjected to many of the same selective forces as was a heterosexual genotype. If the characteristics one desires in a partner, including age, are not specific to others of the opposite sex, homosexual patterns that mirror heterosexual preferences might be expected: Individuals with a genetic marker for homosexuality who mated with individuals of highest reproductive fitness (young women and older men) may have had a reproductive advantage over those who relied on a less successful

reproductive strategy. This evolutionary argument, however, requires a leap of faith in an unobservable process whereby genes directly influence preferences. Because such a link has never been empirically established, that explanation remains purely speculative.

Might the preferences of homosexual men be driven by attractiveness, as has been proposed for the preferences of heterosexual men? There is some evidence that physical attractiveness does play an important role in mate selection among homosexual men (Deaux & Hanna, 1984; Gonzales & Meyers, 1993; Sergios & Cody, 1985). However, without data on gay men's perceptions of the attractiveness of older versus younger men, it is difficult to determine whether older men are less preferred because they are perceived as less attractive. Perhaps older gay men are simply less visible. Only recently have social conditions (at least in the West) made it possible for homosexuals to disclose their sexual orientation and support each other in the face of widespread homophobia. Several studies indicate that homosexual men are accepting their sexual orientation earlier than they did 20 years ago (Herdt, 1989; McDonald, 1982). Also, younger homosexuals may disclose their sexual orientation more readily; older homosexuals grew up in a time of greater social disapproval, and their peer group consists of those who were socialized in this same era. Thus, perhaps younger homosexuals are preferred by older homosexuals because they are perceived as constituting a larger pool of potential respondents.

It seems unlikely that lesbian women seek partners who are near their own age or older for the reasons postulated by both evolutionary and social psychology theorists. The woman sought by a lesbian advertiser is no more likely to possess power, resources, or status than would the advertiser herself. Moreover, past research suggests that lesbians are less likely than heterosexual women to appeal for security and offer their attractiveness as a desirable characteristic to a potential partner (Gonzales & Meyers, 1993). Perhaps women, regardless of sexual orientation, simply prefer similarity in age or seek someone of equal maturity. Indeed, the women in this sample were more likely than the men to include their own age in the range of desired ages, and the self-other correlations in age were highest for women.

The interaction between gender and orientation indicates a greater similarity in age preference between the sexes among homosexuals than among heterosexuals. This result is puzzling and somewhat difficult to interpret. Perhaps a smaller pool from which homosexuals can select potential partners necessitates some compromise between what one most desires and what is available, thereby reducing variability between the sexes among homosexuals.

The use of personal advertisements in the present study creates some problems for generalization. It is impossible to say whether these patterns coincide with the preferences of those who do not use such advertisements in their quest for a suitable partner, although among heterosexuals the same pattern has been found when marriage licenses and self-report data were analyzed. If generaliza-

tion is possible, it may be limited to only those seeking romance and long-term relationships as opposed to a quick sexual encounter. Personal advertisements are not the most efficient means of attracting sex-only partners, if for no other reasons than that the time gap between placing the advertisement and obtaining responses leaves one's sexual appetite unsatiated in the short term.

In summary, the marked similarity of age preferences of heterosexuals and homosexuals is striking, despite a few minor differences. Among heterosexuals, there is clear evidence of the universality of this gender difference in age preferences (Buss, 1989; Kenrick & Keefe, 1992). The current study provides suggestive evidence that this gender difference is not specific to heterosexual preferences. Similar findings from studies of different cultures would further support this claim.

REFERENCES

- Bailey, J. M., & Pillard, R. C. (1991). A genetic study of male sexual orientation. *Archives of Sexual Behavior, 48*, 1089–1096.
- Bar-Tal, D., & Saxe, L. (1976). Perceptions of similarly and dissimilarly attractive couples and individuals. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 33*, 772–781.
- Bem, S. L. (1993). *The lenses of gender: Transforming the debate on sexual inequality*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Buss, D. M. (1985). Human mate selection. *American Scientist, 73*, 47–51.
- Buss, D. M. (1987). Sex differences in human mate selection criteria: An evolutionary perspective. In C. Crawford, M. Smith, & D. Krebs (Eds.), *Sociobiology and psychology: Ideas, issues, and applications* (pp. 335–351). Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum.
- Buss, D. M. (1989). Sex difference in human mate preferences: Evolutionary hypotheses tested in 37 cultures. *Behavioral and Brain Sciences, 12*, 1–49.
- Buss, D. M., & Barnes, M. (1986). Preferences in human mate selection. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 50*, 559–570.
- Cameron, C., Oskamp, S., & Sparks, W. (1977). Courtship American style: Newspaper ads. *The Family Coordinator, 26*, 27–30.
- Cunningham, M. R. (1986). Measuring the physical in physical attractiveness: Quasi-experiments on the sociobiology of female facial beauty. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 50*, 925–935.
- Darlington, R. B. (1990). *Regression and linear models*. New York: McGraw-Hill.
- Davis, S. (1990). Men as success objects and women as sex objects: A study of personal advertisements. *Sex Roles, 23*, 43–50.
- Deaux, K., & Hanna, R. (1984). Courtship in the personals column: The influence of gender and sexual orientation. *Sex Roles, 11*, 363–375.
- Deutsch, F. M., Zalenski, C. M., & Clark, M. E. (1986). Is there a double standard of aging? *Journal of Applied Social Psychology, 16*, 771–785.
- Fausto-Sterling, A. (1992). *Myths of gender* (rev. ed.). New York: Basic Books.
- Feingold, A. (1992). Gender differences in mate selection preferences: A test of the Parental Investment Model. *Psychological Bulletin, 112*, 125–139.
- Gonzales, M. H., & Meyers, S. (1993). "Your mother would like me": Self-presentation in the personals ads of heterosexual and homosexual men and women. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin, 19*, 131–142.

- Harrison, A., & Saeed, L. (1977). Let's make a deal: An analysis of revelations and stipulations in lonely hearts advertisements. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 35, 257-264.
- Harry, J. (1983). Decision making and age differences among gay male couples. *Journal of Homosexuality*, 8, 9-21.
- Harry, J. (1984). *Gay couples*. New York: Praeger.
- Harry, J., & DeVall, W. (1978). Age and sexual culture among homosexually-oriented males. *Archives of Sexual Behavior*, 7, 199-209.
- Herd, G. (1989). Gay and lesbian youth, emergent identities, and cultural scenes at home and abroad. *Journal of Homosexuality*, 17, 1-42.
- Howard, J. A., Blumstein, P., & Schwartz, P. (1987). Social or evolutionary theories? Some observations on preferences in human mate selection. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 53, 194-200.
- Hoyt, L., & Hudson, J. W. (1981). Personal characteristics important in mate preferences among college students. *Social Behavior and Personality*, 9, 93-96.
- Kenrick, D. T., & Keefe, R. C. (1992). Age preferences in mates reflect sex differences in human reproductive strategies. *Behavioral and Brain Sciences*, 15, 75-133.
- Kenrick, D. T., Sadalla, E. K., Groth, G., & Trost, M. R. (1990). Evolution, traits, and the stages of human courtship: Qualifying the parental investment model. *Journal of Personality*, 58, 97-117.
- Mathes, E. W., Brennan, S. M., Haugen, P. M., & Rice, H. B. (1985). Ratings of physical attractiveness as a function of age. *Journal of Social Psychology*, 125, 157-168.
- McDonald, G. J. (1982). Individual differences in the coming out process for gay men: Implications for theoretical models. *Journal of Homosexuality*, 8, 47-60.
- Nevid, J. S. (1984). Sex differences in factors of romantic attraction. *Sex Roles*, 11, 401-411.
- Paterson, C., & Pettijohn, T. F. (1982). Age and human mate selection. *Psychological Reports*, 51, 70.
- Sergios, P., & Cody, J. (1985). Physical attractiveness and social assertiveness skills in male homosexual dating behavior and partner selection. *The Journal of Social Psychology*, 125, 505-514.
- Sigall, H., & Landy, D. (1973). Radiating beauty: Effects of having a physically attractive partner on person perception. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 28, 219-224.
- Symons, D. (1979). *The evolution of human sexuality*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Whitam, F. L., Diamond, M., & Martin, J. (1993). Homosexual orientation in twins: A report on 61 pairs and three triplet sets. *Archives of Sexual Behavior*, 22, 187-206.

Received June 13, 1994