What do men like about women and why?

Evolutionary psychology accounts for one possible explanation of what men look for in women. The theory claims that men are not as reliant on their mate as women are on men therefore men are not as strongly oriented as women to spending their entire lives with only one mate, thus the woman's desire to have one mate to help raise her children pressures males to be monogamous. However if men do not want monogamy, it may result in them settling for a lower quality of woman since the high quality women choose their mate based on his commitment to monogamy. But, mutual selection occurs in marriages, so the man can choose his mate, just as the woman chooses him, and often his criterion is based on very different qualities than the woman's. Evolutionary psychology offers one view about male psychology. Not all psychologists agree that this theory offers a complete explanation of "what men want," but some find the logic attractive.

This essay will be based on an evolutionary account of what men like about women and why. However in order to gain a broader understanding different standpoints will be considered when evolutionary psychology fails to give a conclusive account. The main factors that will firstly be discussed are honest signals, which are those that men observe as giving them better reproductive potential such as physical attractiveness, youthful characteristics such as neotenous faces and small feet, feature symmetry, body shape and breasts. Finally other psychological factors such as personality and intelligence will be discussed.

The saying claims that 'beauty truly is in the eye of the beholder', however there have been certain standards of female *physical attractiveness* that have become widely accepted. These standards are indicators of health and according to evolutionary theory give men clues about the reproductive capability of the woman. Without these standards of beauty, a man would have a difficult time discriminating a healthy woman who would produce healthy children from a woman of lesser health. Features of physical appearance such as full lips, clear smooth skin, clear eyes, lustrous hair and good muscle tone were all indications to our evolutionary ancestors of a healthy woman.

Evidence of physical attractiveness as an important attribute to today's men comes from the content analysis of lonely-hearts advertisements. Heterosexual men's advertisements for women have been shown in 43% of adverts to place strong emphasis on physical attractiveness with cues such as 'attractive', 'cute', 'fit' and 'slender' being used. However less emphasis has been placed on other trait categories such as status/wealth, which in comparison has been shown to be of importance to women (Buss and Barnes 1986, Buss 1987). However Dardes and Koski (1988) claim that results are derived from biased atypical sample as it may be the case that only certain personality types are prepared to advertise who may not have had initial luck in relationships, thus placing adverts with biased choice preferences towards traits which were lacking in previous relations such as physical attractiveness. However results cannot be discarded as cross-cultural studies have also shown this consistency of males mate choice preference being strongly driven by physical attractiveness.

These studies were carried out by Buss and his colleagues to determine whether human mate choice showed a consistent pattern over the world. In terms of male mate choice Buss et al (1989) found that after interviewing over ten thousand people in thirty seven different cultures, male mate choice was driven by 'physically attractive, young

and sexually loyal wives who will remain faithful to them until death'. This analysis is therefore gives a reliable results as it represents a broad population.

According to evolutionary psychology, ancestral men evolved ways to sense how well woman might reproduce offspring (Buss, 1994). One of the most obvious clues is *youth*, a correlate of physical attractiveness, which has also been shown to be a desirable trait by older men in lonely-hearts advertisements. This could be because the older a woman gets, the less fertile she becomes. According to evolutionary psychologists, a man sees fertility as an important attribute because it assures him that his bloodline will continue. In many cultures, men prefer wives who are younger, although the age difference varies across societies.

In the United States, college students surveyed between 1939-1988 indicated the preferred age difference is approximately 2.5 years. Men who were 21 years old preferred, on average, women who were 18.5 years (Buss, 1994). As men get older, they tend to be attracted to women who are increasingly younger than they are. Men in their thirties prefer women 5 years younger, while men in their 70's prefer women who are 10 to 20 years younger. In evolutionary terms, the older male is strategically balancing his aging, and thus poorer quality genes with the younger females youth, and thus good genetic potential in order to reproduce healthy offspring.

Aside from the widely accepted facial features which have been recognised as being attractive to both males and females (prominent cheek bones, large eyes and wide smile), facial features have also been shown to be attractive to males if they look youthful, smaller and neotenous, representing a baby face. For example a smaller chin is more attractive in females than males and this has come about due to lower levels of testosterone (Cunningham et al 1990). Jones (1995) highlighted this in a cross-cultural study using a youth indicator scale of women. He found that that female attractiveness involves a substantial neotenous component as women whose predicted age was less than their actual age, were considered more attractive.

However this bias towards youthful features is problematic from an evolutionary standpoint as those with the most child-like faces are children and next inline are old women whose facial features have shrunk with age, and these groups of people are infertile. Therefore male's attraction to more youthful faces is better explained by the observational standpoint claiming that women's faces always look younger than males faces of the same age, therefore by looking for 'youth' men are more likely to get a healthier female. From the female point of view there is evidence that youth is seen as an important component of attraction as the random attitude drift model claims that attributes such as youth are for aesthetic preference rather than biological function which in turn have led to social pressures for women to remain youthful looking. This is evident as the beauty industry is premised on a multi million dollar quest to retain a youthful appearance as it is known that the ageing process causes a decline in physical attractiveness, thus fashion magazines have portrayed celebrities getting plastic surgery or face lifts encouraging youth.

Small feet are also reported to be more attractive to males. This is evident as practices such as foot binding in females in China (Jackson 2002) and US women wearing excessively small shoes (Frey et al 1993) indicates that small feet are a more attractive feature in women. There are two hypotheses as to why this may have arisen. Sexual dimorphism in foot size may lead observers to view small feet as feminine and large feet as masculine. Alternately,

because small female feet indicate youth, evolution may have favored a male preference for this attribute in order to maximize returns on male reproductive investment.

Frey et al (2005) confirmed these hypotheses using line drawings that varied only in regard to relative foot size, examining attractiveness judgments in nine cultures. They found that small foot size was generally preferred for females by males. This confirmed observational hypothesis predicting symmetrical polarizing preferences, with small feet being preferred in women and large feet being preferred in men, however disputed evolutionary hypothesis predicting asymmetrical preferences, with the average phenotype being preferred in men, as according to evolutionary accounts small feet are problematic and associated with pelvic insufficiency.

Symmetry is yet another measure of attractiveness that men use when evaluating any potential mate as it is held to be an indicator of 'good genes' (Zahavi, 1975). Scientists say that the preference for symmetry is a highly evolved trait seen in many different animals. Female swallows, for example, prefer males with longer and more symmetric tails, while female zebra finches mate with males with symmetrically coloured leg bands

Fluctuating asymmetry (FA) is a measure of symmetry of a bilateral character (e.g. ear length or hand breadth) that fluctuates. Although this appears to be a minute detail, it could have its links to our evolutionary past. This is because departures from perfect FA are assumed to be the result of environmental stressors such as physical assaults, parasitic infections, reduced nutrition and disease. For example a high FA (e.g. one foot longer than the other) is thought to indicate a poor condition on the assumption that it requires a sound metabolism to grow perfectly symmetrical features. Therefore good symmetry of the body and face are deemed to be indicators of health.

Body shape preference has changed through time, however it has been widely accepted that the hourglass figure (narrow waist, with wider chest and hips) is attractive. Singh (1993) using a rating measure for female line drawings has reported that men tend to have a preference for women with a low waist to hip ratio (WHR) centering near 0.7 (curvaceous body). This is shown in real life scenarios, as Playboy centrefold models and Miss America beauty competition winners have WHR around this optimal. However the possible reasons for this attraction in body shape are varied.

One possible explanation is because the 0.7 WHR is the optimal amount of fat distribution for fertility. Zaadstra et al (1993), based on a large study of Dutch women (N = 542), found that a 0.1 unit increase in waist-hip ratio led to a 30% decrease in probability of conception per cycle. That is, a woman with a WHR of .80 instead of Singh's "optimal" 0.7 would have a 30% lower chance of becoming pregnant, regardless of age or total weight. Furnham et al (1997) also report that WHR can predict a number of potentially life-threatening illness, including diabetes, hypertension, heart attack and endometrium cancer, all of which weigh heavily on issues of fertility.

Recently, some researchers have argued that Body Mass Index (BMI) is a more appropriate body-type criterion in male sexual preferences due to the fact that most female fashion and glamour models fall within a narrow BMI range (Tovee et al 1997). Therefore Tovee et al (1999), counters the arguments presented by Singh (1993) and presents research showing that BMI is a much stronger cue for physical attractiveness than WHR. They claim their disparate conclusions are the result of the line drawings used in the study, as the changing width of the torso around

the waist distorts the perceived BMI in such a way that the two measures, WHR and BMI, covary, thus making women with thicker waists look fatter. However because Tovee et al's own study on male college students used pictures of real women, where both WHR and BMI were precisely known and effects could be estimated seperately it became evident that BMI emerged as the most important factor accounting for 74% of variance in ratings compared to WHR accounting for only 2%.

BMI is also reported to be more strongly linked to fertility and health. Not only is BMI consistant with the results of Zaadstra et al (1993), but Manson et al (1995) found that the mortality of women in a large cohort study was lowest in those with a BMI near 19, the attractive optimal according to Tovee et al. Lake et al (1997) and Brown (1993) also find that elevated BMI values are responsible for factors like menstrual problems, hypertension in pregnancy and subfertility.

However regardless of the above results men preferences for body shape is perhaps the most culturally variable standard of beauty. The attractiveness of the shape of a woman's body is directly linked to what her body type represents in her culture. For instance, in a culture where food is scarce, such as among the Bushmen in Australia, a high status woman would be better fed and therefore larger. In a culture such as the United States and many Western European societies where food is abundant, the relationship between plumpness and status is reversed, and the rich distinguish themselves through thinness (Buss, 1994). Men do not have an evolved preference for body type however evolutionary psychologists claim men do have a preference for features linked with status.

Although women in the United States often think men prefer a thinner woman, a study done by Rozin proves differently. The women were asked to identify the ideal body type for themselves and the body type they thought men preferred. In both cases, women chose body types slimmer than average. When men were then asked to indicate the body type they are most attracted to, they typically chose the average female build. The women in this study believed that men preferred thinner women, which proved not to be true, giving an example that male body shape choice is a subjectively variable factor.

Female human breasts have undergone sexual elaboration through mate choice by males. These organs store substantial amounts of fat, so could function as indicators of female nutritional status and hence fertility. Low et al (1987) have proposed that males who chose to devote mating effort to women with prominent breasts got mates who were better able to nurse their children, causing the males to leave more surviving offspring. This led to a male preference for women with breasts. However, males could not distinguish large breasts due to fat from large breasts that really indicated much glandular tissue. Thus, women with breast fat deposits were more successful at attracting males. However this cannot be explained fully by the evolutionary standpoint that claims that those women with bigger breasts are either lactating or pregnant and thus infertile. Breasts therefore may be attractive to males as a result of sexual rather than natural selection as breast stimulation elicits the release of oxytocin (hormone associated with sexual arousal) therefore this could be the reason why breasts are sexual objects to males and why adult literature features large breasts so widely.

Aside from beauty men want a partner who will fulfil them emotionally as well as physicall y. A good personality is a must for every man in a serious relationship. Therefore men also look for similar levels of intelligence, optimistic attitudes, self-confidence, and partners who enjoy the same hobbies and/or interests they do.

In society however some psychologists claim that attractive people tend to be more intelligent, better adjusted, and more popular. This is described as the halo effect. Research shows attractive people also have more occupational success and more dating experience than their unattractive counterparts. An alternative explanation for attractive people achieving more in life is that we automatically categorize others before having an opportunity to evaluate their personalities, based on cultural stereotypes, which say attractive people must be intrinsically good, and ugly people must be inherently bad. But Elliot Aronson, a social psychologist at Stanford University, believes self-fulfilling prophecies in which a person's confident self-perception, further perpetuated by healthy feedback from others may play a role in success as well. Aronson suggests based on the self-fulfilling prophecy that people who feel they are attractive though not necessarily rated as such are just as successful as their counterparts who are judged to be good-looking. Therefore according to this theory men by looking for physical attractiveness are gaining good personalities as well, which is debatable.

To conclude, men like women who are physically attractive constituting of symmetrical neotenous faces, symmetrical features, small feet, curvaceous body shape with a BMI of around 19, large breasts and youthfulness. This can explained partly by evolutionary theory claiming that these factors in some way increase reproductive success, as women are healthier thus more fertile, however it cannot explain some features such as breasts and smaller feet for example which may be due to sexual rather than natural selection better explained by observational and random drift hypotheses. Another major critique of the evolutionary account is that it fails to explain psychological factors that are shown to be important to men, especially in long-term relationships, as selecting a young woman with attractive child bearing hips doesn't necessarily mean she will be a good mother, ignoring factors such her parenting skills. Therefore evolutionary theory assumes that men ignore the quality of life for the child once they are born but are more focused on reproducing larger quantities of children. This however is not the case as social situations are changing and gender divides are narrowing men are increasingly more involved in the quality of bringing up their children, therefore physical attractiveness may have short term appeal in terms of initial selection of mates however not necessarily long term appeal in terms of commitment where psychological characteristics maybe of more importance. Therefore it can be argued whether men are selecting solely for fertility as evolutionary theory claims or someone that arouses them psychologically, the answer maybe both. Therefore future directions should compare the importance of physical attractiveness in existing long-term relationships, to psychological factors such as personality and intelligence to see how males weight importance, especially in today's society where traditional gender roles are changing.

Resources

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