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## **MEN AND WOMEN PREFER RISK TAKERS AS ROMANTIC AND NONROMANTIC PARTNERS**

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### **ABSTRACT**

*Eighty-seven men and 219 women rated the desirability of either a low, moderate, or high risk-taker as a partner in several contexts. Women were more selective than men in all contexts. Men and women preferred risk takers as friends and short-term romantic partners but only women preferred risk takers as long-term romantic partners. The observed gender differences are consistent with predictions from the perspective of evolutionary psychology. However, the findings also evidence the similarity in men and women's interpersonal attraction criteria and point to the need for examining more proximal mechanisms that might make risk taking an appealing attribute in another person.*

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### **INTRODUCTION**

A growing body of psychological research indicates that men more than women: 1) report a willingness to engage in a variety of risky behaviors (Gullone, et al., 2000), 2) take financial risks in investment decisions (Felton et al., 2003), 3) consume dangerous amounts of alcohol (Kahler, et al. 2003), and 4) die in automobile accidents (US Department of Transportation, 1996). One way of accounting for sex differences on any trait is to assume that the difference was shaped by sexual selection, because ancestral men and women weighted the trait differentially in assessing mate value. For example, the sexual dimorphism in physical size that is currently observable in humans could have arisen from a greater preference among ancestral women for large mates because they offered greater protection or resource acquisition. Consistent with this notion, women value height, muscularity, and broad shoulders in potential mates (Buss, 1994; Barber, 1995; Franzoi & Hertzog, 1987). Men's greater risk taking, just as their larger size, could be explained as the result of sexual selection. There are at least two candidate explanations as to why ancestral women would have preferred mates who engaged in

dangerous and potentially self-destructive behaviors. The first is that such behaviors lead to greater accumulation of resources or demonstrated the abilities necessary for resource acquisition. Buss (1989) presented evidence that cross culturally women, more than men, valued status and resources in a potential mate. If a trait signaled men's ability to acquire resources, then ancestral women would have benefited from selecting as mates men who demonstrated that trait. Zuckerman and Kuhlman (2000) argued that risk taking could be such a trait because the activities, such as big game hunting, that lead to status and resources were inherently risky. Alternatively, ancestral women could have favored men who took risks because dangerous behaviors signaled good genes. In his handicap principle, Zahavi (1975) suggested that indicators of genetic fitness that are extremely costly evolved through sexual selection because organisms with poorer quality genes could not afford the cost of such physical or psychological ornaments. Zahavi points to the example of peacocks' tails, the size and the conspicuous patterning of which, simultaneously make peacocks more attractive to peahens but also put them at greater risk of predation. The detrimental feature of peacocks' tails persisted because peahens preferred to mate with peacocks possessing such traits. This preference, it is suggested, reflects the fact that only the highest quality peacocks could afford to have such a handicapping feature. Nell (2002) applied this handicapping principle to the high prevalence of reckless behavior among young men, suggesting that the dangerous actions of men, like peacocks' tails, might have served as a fitness indicator.

Kelly and Dunbar (2001) tested the prediction, based on sexual selection theory, that women would value bravery when evaluating potential mates. These authors had 60 women and 60 men rate the desirability as potential friends, short-term romantic partners, and long-term romantic partners of profiles depicting hypothetical people. The profiles varied in bravery as operationalized by type of hobbies enjoyed (e.g., free fall parachuting vs. surfing the internet). Women showed a preference for brave men in all three contexts: as friends, as short-term romantic partners, and as long-term romantic partners, but bravery had the biggest effect on ratings of short-term romantic partners. A similar pattern of responses was found among men (who were instructed to answer as if they were women). It is difficult to assess the bearing of these findings on the sexual selection account of gender differences in risk taking because male preference was not assessed. From the sexual selection perspective women would be expected to place more value on risk taking than would men when evaluating potential partners. The lack of such a gender difference would indicate the need for a more proximal explanation of the appeal of risk taking as a trait in other people.

The present study further tested the sexual selection account of gender differences in risk taking by examining the preferences of both men and women. If men's greater risk taking was shaped by sexual selection then women but not men should value risk taking in potential mates. This gender difference should be especially evident in the context of long-term romantic relationships. A gender (men /women) by risk (low/moderate/ high) between subjects factorial design was used to address these questions.

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## **METHOD**

## **Participants**

Eighty-seven men and 219 women enrolled in introductory psychology classes participated in the present study to receive credit towards the fulfillment of a class research requirement. The mean age of participants was 20.8 years ( $SD = 5.3$ ).

## **Materials**

The researchers constructed three hypothetical personality profiles (see appendix). The profiles contained ratings of agreement with 12 items from the Arnett Inventory of Sensation Seeking (1994) such as "I can see how it would be exciting to be in a battle during a war", ratings of the appeal of 12 risky activities such as skydiving (Hirschberger, Florian, Mikulincer, Goldenberg, & Pyszczynski, 2002), and essays in response to the statement "I take risks ...". The high-risk profile was operationally defined as a mean response of 3.5 on the sensation seeking items (on a 4 point scale where 4 indicated strong agreement with items in direction of sensation seeking), a mean rating of 8.5 on the appeal of risky activities (on a 9-point scale where 9 indicated the activity as extremely appealing), and a response to the essay that indicated a tendency to take risks all of the time. The moderate risk profile was operationally defined as a mean response of 2.5 on the sensation seeking items, a mean rating of 5 on the appeal of risky activities, and a response to the essay that indicated a tendency to take risks some of the time. The low risk profile was operationally defined as a mean response of 1.5 on the sensation seeking items, a mean rating of 1.5 on the appeal of risky activities, and a response to the essay that indicated a tendency to never take risks. The dependent variable, taken from Singh (1995), required participants to rate on a 9-point Likert type scale (where 1 = not at all desirable and 9 = extremely desirable) the desirability of the person described in the profile as a partner in a variety of contexts: coffee and conversation, non-romantic friendship, dating, short-term romantic relationship, long-term romantic relationship, and marriage.

## **Procedure**

Participants reported in groups of 3-5 to a social psychology lab where they were informed that this was a study of the impressions people form about members of the opposite sex. Participants were told that they would read a personality profile and make some evaluations of the person described. At this point women were given a black folder labeled male profile and men were given a black folder labeled female profile. Participants were randomly assigned to read a profile depicting either a low, moderate, or high risk-taker. The experimenter was blind as to which profile the participants received. Participants were instructed to read the profile carefully so that they could get a good sense of what the person was like and were given a response sheet on which to record the appeal of the person described in the profile in six relationship contexts and to provide their demographic information. The entire experimental session lasted about 20 minutes.

## **RESULTS**

Results were analyzed using a gender by risk multivariate analysis of variance. There was a significant main effect for gender  $F(6, 295) = 4.7, p < .01$ , a significant main effect for the risk

taking of person depicted  $F(12, 592) = 7.9, p < .01$ , but no statistically significant interaction between gender and risk taking. Women gave lower ratings than men for the desirability of the partner depicted in the contexts of dating  $F(1, 300) = 13.3, p < .01$ , short-term relationship  $F(1, 300) = 23.2, p < .01$ , and long-term relationship  $F(1, 300) = 4.3, p < .05$ . The pooled responses of men and women showed that participants preferred risk taking partners in the contexts of coffee and conversation  $F(2, 300) = 28.1, p < .01$ , dating  $F(2, 300) = 16.1, p < .01$ , non-romantic friendship  $F(2, 300) = 25.9, p < .01$ , and short-term romantic relationship  $F(2, 300) = 24.3, p < .01$ . Tukey honestly stated difference (HSD) post hoc tests indicated that, in all these contexts, high risk taking partners were preferred over moderate risk taking partners and moderate risk taking partners were preferred over low risk taking partners.

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Although no multivariate gender by risk interactions was found, a univariate analysis seemed warranted because sexual selection theory would predict sex differences to emerge only in certain contexts. Specifically, from the perspective that views female preference for risk taking men as arising from the fact that such risky behaviors were associated with greater resource acquisition, the relative impact of risk taking on men and women's evaluations of others should be most different in the context of long-term mating. Univariate Analysis of Variance was used to examine the impact of risk taking on desirability in each relationship context separately for men and women. The means and standard deviations for women's ratings of desirability as a function of relationship context and risk taking are presented in Table 1.

**Table 1. Women's Ratings of Desirability as a Function of Risk Taking and Relationship Context**

Context	Risk taking			F
	Low	Moderate	High	
Coffee	3.4a (2.0)	4.6b (1.9)	5.8c (2.3)	24**
Friend	4.0a (2.1)	5.1b (2.1)	6.3c (2.2)	21**
Date	2.2a (1.6)	3.2b (1.9)	4.2c (2.6)	17**
Short-term	1.9a (1.4)	2.9b (2.1)	3.7c (2.5)	14**
Long-term	1.8a (1.6)	2.4ab (1.8)	2.7bc (2.1)	4.5*
Marriage	1.9a (1.8)	2.0a (1.7)	2.6a (2.3)	2.4

Note: Reading across rows, means with different subscripts differ at the .05 alpha level, based on Tukey HSD post hoc tests; standard deviations are shown in parentheses.

\*\*  $p < .01$ , \*  $p < .05$

Women preferred moderate risk-takers more than low risk-takers and high risk-takers more than moderate and low risk-takers in the contexts of coffee and conversation, non-romantic friendship, dating, and short-term romantic relationship. Women also showed a preference for risk-takers in the context of long-term romantic relationships. However, only one comparison was statistically significant with high risk-takers being rated as more desirable than low risk-takers. A similar pattern of preference was found in the context of marriage although this difference did not reach statistical significance.

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The means and standard deviations for men's ratings of desirability as a function of relationship context and risk taking are presented in Table 2.

**Table 2. Men's Ratings of Desirability as a Function of Risk Taking and Relationship Context**

Context	Risk taking			F
	Low	Moderate	High	
Coffee	3.7a (1.9)	4.5a (1.9)	6.3b (2.8)	9.4**
Friend	4.2a (2.6)	5.6b (1.3)	6.8b (2.6)	9.3**
Date	3.6a (2.6)	3.7a (1.4)	5.2b (2.3)	4.9*
Short-term	3.2a (2.3)	3.4a (1.5)	5.8b (2.5)	12.4**
Long-term	2.7a (2.7)	2.8a (1.5)	2.8a (1.9)	0
Marriage	2.3a (2.4)	2.5a (1.9)	2.7a (2.2)	0

Note: Reading across rows, means with different subscripts differ at the .05 alpha level, based on Tukey HSD post hoc tests; standard deviations are shown in parentheses.

\*\*  $p < .01$ , \*  $p < .05$

In the context of coffee and conversation, dating, and short-term romantic relationship men preferred high risk-takers more than moderate and low risk-takers but showed no preference for moderate risk-takers over low risk-takers. In the context of non-romantic friendship, men preferred moderate and high risk-takers more than low risk-takers but showed no preference for high risk-takers more than moderate risk-takers. Risk taking had no effect on men's ratings of desirability in the contexts of long-term romantic partner or marriage.

A comparison of the results for men and women reveals some interesting similarities and differences. Both women and men showed a preference for risk taking when evaluating potential partners in the contexts of coffee and conversation, non-romantic friendship, dating, and shot-

term romantic relationship. However, the nature of this preference was somewhat different with women showing an incremental increase in desirability with increasing risk but men mainly showing a preference for high risk over the other two profiles. Further, only women showed a preference for risk-takers in the long-term romantic context. These findings are in some ways consistent with the predictions of the sexual selection perspective but also point to the need for more proximal explanations of why both men and women value risk taking in potential partners in many contexts.

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## DISCUSSION

The results of the present study are only partially consistent with predictions based on the perspective of evolutionary psychology. The finding that women were more discriminating than men when evaluating potential partners is congruent with the assertion made in parental investment theory (Trivers, 1972) that the sex that bears the greatest cost of reproduction will be the most choosy when selecting a mate. Further, the findings replicated previous research (Kelly & Dunbar, 2001) that showed women prefer risk-taking men in a variety of relationship contexts. The present findings extend on this previous research by directly comparing men and women's preferences for risk taking others. Consistent with the sexual selection perspective, women but not men preferred risk-takers as long-term romantic partners.

It should be noted, however, that the evolutionary perspective is not the only theoretical orientation from which one could predict gender differences in mate preference. For example, Eagly and Woods (1999) have suggested that sex differences in many domains, including mate preference, emerged not as a function of evolution but as a function of the different social roles to which cultures assigned men and women. To the extent that many cultures historically assigned men but not women to roles such as hunting and warfare that allowed for accumulating resources, women would value resource acquisition abilities in a mate because they would have no means of acquiring their own resources. From the social roles perspective, women would be expected to devalue resource acquisition skills in potential mates as they were given more opportunities to gain resources for themselves. This perspective is supported by findings that in cultures where women have more educational and work opportunities they place less emphasis on resources as a mate selection criterion (Eagly & Wood, 1999; Kasse & Sharma, 1999). Whereas, the present study was constructed to test hypotheses based on evolutionary theorizing the same predictions could have been made from social roles theory. A major limitation of the present study is that the findings do not demonstrate the superiority of the sexual selection perspective over alternative perspectives in accounting for sex differences in mate preference. The present finding that women more than men value risk taking in a potential long-term mate is as consistent with sex roles theory (Eagly & Wood, 1999) as with evolutionary theory.

In contrast to the gender differences observed in the present study, the sexual selection model does not account for the observed similarities between men and women. The finding that men and women preferred high risk taking romantic and non-romantic partners negates neither the possibility that men's greater risk taking or women's preference for risk taking men evolved through sexual selection. However, the sexual selection perspective offers little explanation of

women's preference for risk-takers in non-romantic contexts, nor for men's preference for risk-takers in any context. The similarity in men and women's partner preference observed in the present study is consistent with previous work from the evolutionary perspective (Botwin, et al.1997) demonstrating remarkable congruence in the traits that men and women found appealing in a mate. Buss (1989) reported that men and women in 37 diverse cultures highly valued excitement in a potential mate. Perhaps the preference of men and women for risk-takers merely reflects the appeal of novelty and excitement that such people would likely bring to interpersonal relationships.

Because the evolutionary perspective does not offer a distal account for the equal appeal of risk taking partners in non-romantic and short-term romantic contexts, a more proximal explanatory mechanism is required. Neil (2002) suggests myth, narrative, and news as potential proximal mechanisms propagating the appeal of risk-takers. To the extent that cultural narratives and media portrayal depict heroes as risk-takers, those individuals who emulate the dangerous actions of such heroes will be valued as partners in all interpersonal interaction contexts. Both the evolutionary and social roles perspective would expect such cultural reinforcement to be more influential for men than women, either because they are genetically predisposed or socially assigned to engage in dangerous activities. If men must take risks in warfare and hunting then they should be socially reinforced to emulate risk-taking heroes. The authors know of no research documenting an increase in media portrayals of women taking risks, but an intriguing possibility exists that such a trend may have socially reinforced the appeal of such women to men. A fruitful avenue for future research might be to examine archival sources for changing portrayals of women in terms of risk taking and to assess experimentally the effects of such portrayals on men's partner preferences. The gender similarities observed in the present study may reflect a gender convergence in person perception criteria based on changing cultural depictions of women. This convergence is consistent with the cross cultural evidence reported by Buss, Shackelford, and Kirkpatrick (2001) that men and women's mate preference criteria have become more similar over the last 50 years with women increasing the importance they placed on attractiveness and men increasing the importance they placed on good financial prospects. Further research seems warranted to examine potential proximal mechanisms underlying gender similarities in partner preference.

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## **APPENDIX: SCALES AND STIMULUS MATERIALS**

### **General Tendencies**

Rank the following statements on a scale from 1 to 4, where 1 = strongly disagree and 4 = strongly agree.

I can see how it would be interesting to marry someone from a foreign country.

If I have to wait a long time, I'm usually patient about it.

I think it's fun and exciting to perform or speak before a group.

If I were to go to an amusement park, I would prefer to ride the rollercoaster or other fast rides.

I would like to travel to places that are strange and far away.

I would have enjoyed being one of the first explorers of an unknown land.

In general, I work better when I'm under pressure.

I often like to have the T.V. on while I'm doing something else, such as reading or cleaning up

It would be interesting to see a car accident happen.

I like the feeling of standing next to the edge on a high place and looking down.

If it were possible to visit another planet or the moon for free, I would be among the first to sign up.

I can see how it must be exciting to be in a battle during a war.

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### **Activity Appeal**

Please indicate how much each of the following activities appeals to you. Where 1 = not at all appealing and 9 = extremely appealing.

Rock climbing

Engaging in casual sex

Driving fast

Riding a motorcycle

Skydiving

Drinking large quantities of alcohol

Snow boarding

Trying heroin

Hang gliding

Bungy jumping

Going white water rafting

Ski jumping

### **Personal Essay**

In the space below write a few paragraphs in response to the following statement

I take risks when . . .

(Low Risk Response) I never take risks. I consider myself a cautious person. I try to think things through carefully before doing them and ask myself what could go wrong here. I think the world would be a safer place if others did the same.

(Moderate Risk Response) I take risks sometimes. I don't consider myself a reckless person but I am willing to take a risk if there is something to be gained. If there is something I want badly I try to get it even if it is risky.

(High Risk Response) I take risks all the time. I think life is too short to worry about what could go wrong. I like to do dangerous things and live life on the edge. I never think I shouldn't do that because it is too dangerous I just go for it.

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### **Desirability**

Based on the personality profile of the opposite sex person you just read, how desirable would you find this person as a partner in each of the following situations where 1 = not at all desirable and 9 = extremely desirable?

Coffee and Conversation

Dating

Nonromantic Friendship

Short-Term Romantic Relationship

Long-Term Romantic Relationship

Marriage

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