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# Gender differences in the perceptions for the ideal sex partner

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**ABSTRACT** *The aim of the current study was to investigate the gender differences in preferences for particular characteristics of an ideal sexual partner, and also to investigate the degree men and women accurately estimate the preferences of the other gender. A sample of 289 men and 137 women, who were serving in the army, completed a questionnaire about what they believed the ideal sex partner's characteristics were, as well as what they thought the other gender would answer to the same set of questions. Relative to women, men valued more highly the preference of a sex partner who is physically attractive, experiences orgasm easily, and likes erotic videos or books. Women, more highly valued the preference of a partner who is knowledgeable about sex and takes the dominant role during sex. The comparison between men's reported preference and women's rating regarding what they thought men prefer, showed that women overestimated the degree to which men like a partner saying compliments during sex, and like erotic videos and books. The comparison between women's reported preferences and men's rating regarding what they thought women prefer, showed that men underestimated women's preference for a partner who clearly communicates desires, and experience orgasm easily. The findings of the present study may have important implications for sexual counselling or education.*

**KEYWORDS:** *sex partner; gender; intimate; love.*

## **Introduction**

Researchers have long been interested in interpersonal perception within relationships. Much of the early interest focused on actual similarity, assumed similarity, and accuracy of perception as predictors of marital quality (Lavinger & Breedlove, 1996). More recent studies have examined how attributions about partner (Bradbury & Fincham, 1990) and idealization of the partner (Murray *et al.*, 1996) affect relationship satisfaction. Denny *et al.* (1984), comparing men's and women's preferences for sexual partners, have found that male undergraduates place the most emphasis on genital stimulation and intercourse, whereas female undergraduates most valued foreplay. The women's needs for sexual enjoyment and orgasm are not well met by conventional vaginal intercourse (Bancroft, 2002). Hatfield *et al.* (1989), found that there were no gender differences, in male and female undergraduates, with

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regard to the activities related to love and intimacy, but there were gender differences on several of the items related to partner initiative and sexual variance. Similarly, Purine *et al.* (1994), found many gender differences, including men's greater preference for use of drugs, alcohol and erotica with a partner, while women demonstrated greater preference than did men for emotionally intimate, romantic settings, as well as nongenital forms of sexual stimulation.

McGuirl and Wiederman (2000) investigated the gender differences in preferences for particular characteristics in a sexual partner and the extents to which men and women accurately estimate the preferences of the other gender. Although there were not found to be notable similarities in what men and women most valued in a potential long-term sex partner, gender differences with regard to ratings of several of the items were found. Men and women under- or overestimated the ratings of the other gender with regard to several characteristics. The aim of the current study was, using the McGuirl and Wiederman questionnaire, to further investigate the gender differences in preferences for particular characteristics of a sexual partner. Also, to investigate the degree men and women accurately estimate the preferences of the other gender.

## **Method**

Two hundred and eighty-nine heterosexual men (mean age: 24.5 years, SD: 2.2) and 137 heterosexual women (mean age: 23.8 years, SD: 1.3) participated in this study. Men had 16.7 (SD: 2.5), and women had 13.1 (SD: 5.3) years of education. All of them were Greek soldiers and they were healthy, because individuals suffering from serious physical and mental disorders were exempted. The participants were gathered in groups of 10–20 in the campus library. They had a debriefing by the interviewer (O.G.) in which they were informed about the nature of the research task, and it was explained that their participation was voluntary.

All participants completed a standard questionnaire (McGuirl and Wiederman, 2000), which was divided into two parts. Both parts had the same set of 10 items each, and they were marked with a six-point Likert scale. The first part began with the statement: 'Consider the extent to which you would like your long-term sex partner to display each characteristic, and use the following scale to indicate your degree of agreement or disagreement.' The second part was introduced with separate instructions for men and women responders. The men's instructions were: 'Consider the extent to which you think a woman would like her long-term sex partner to display each characteristic and use the following scale to indicate your agreement or disagreement.' Similarly, the women's instructions were: 'Consider the extent to which you think a man. . .' The same 10 partner characteristics were presented for self, as well as men's and women's estimates of preference held by the other gender. The 10 specific characteristics are listed in Tables I–III.

We concluded three sets of 10 *t*-test analyses. In the first we compared men's and women's ratings of the importance of each of the characteristics in a long-term sex partner. Next, we compared women's ratings of men's preferences to men's actual ratings. Last, we compared men's ratings of women's preferences to woman's actual

ratings. Pearson correlation analysis was used to search for associations between the actual men's and women's ratings of the importance of each of the characteristics in a long term sex partner.

## Results

The comparison of men and women, regarding the rated importance of particular characteristics in long-term sex partners, showed that five of the 10 characteristics were statistically significant. Relative to women, men valued more highly the preference of a sex partner who is physically attractive ( $p < 0.04$ ), experiences orgasm easily ( $p < 0.00$ ), and likes erotic videos or books ( $p < 0.02$ ). Women, more highly valued the preference of a partner who is knowledgeable about sex ( $p < 0.00$ ) and takes the dominant role during sex ( $p < 0.00$ ) (Table I).

Pearson's correlation analysis showed that, in both men and women the preference of a partner who is open to discuss sex was significantly correlated with the preference of being uninhibited ( $r = 0.46$  and  $r = 0.54$ , respectively). Similarly, in both men and women, the preference of a partner who is knowledgeable about sex was significantly correlated with the preference in taking the dominant during sex ( $r = 0.32$  and  $r = 0.31$ , respectively). Also, in both men and women, the preference of a partner who is easily sexually aroused was significantly correlated with the preference in experiencing orgasm easily ( $r = 0.45$  and  $r = 0.35$ , respectively). Only in men was the preference of a partner who pays compliments during sex found to be correlated significantly with the degree she likes erotic material ( $r = 0.34$ ). Only in women was the preference of a partner who clearly communicates his desires found to be significantly correlated with the degree he is sexually aroused ( $r = 0.35$ ) (not shown in a table).

The comparison between men's reported preference and women's rating regarding what they thought men prefer, showed inaccuracies in two of the ten items. Specifically, women overestimated the degree to which men like a partner

TABLE I. Comparison between men ( $n = 289$ ) and women ( $n = 137$ ) with regard to self-reported preferences for particular characteristics in long-term sex partners

Partner characteristic	Men's actual Mean (SD)	Women's actual Mean (SD)	$F$ (1,424)	$P <$
Be open to discussing sex	4.1 (1.3)	3.9 (1.3)	0.48	0.486
Be uninhibited	4.4 (1.4)	4.4 (1.3)	1.69	0.194
Be physically attractive	5.6 (0.6)	5.4 (0.7)	4.15	0.042
Be knowledgeable about sex	4.4 (1.4)	4.9 (1.0)	30.99	0.000
Pay me compliments during sex	4.5 (1.3)	4.5 (1.2)	2.42	0.120
Communicate desires	5.4 (0.9)	5.4 (0.8)	2.02	0.155
Be easily sexually aroused	4.9 (1.0)	4.7 (1.0)	0.63	0.424
Experience orgasm easily	4.7 (1.1)	3.8 (1.3)	14.23	0.000
Like erotic videos, books, magazines	3.6 (1.4)	3.5 (1.2)	5.46	0.020
Take the dominant role during sex	4.4 (1.3)	4.8 (0.9)	25.86	0.000

TABLE II. Comparison between men's ( $n = 289$ ) self-reported preferences for particular characteristics in long-term sex partners and women's ( $n = 137$ ) estimates regarding what they thought men prefer

Partner characteristic	Men's actual Mean (SD)	Women's estimates Mean (SD)	$F$ (1,424)	$P <$
Be open to discussing sex	4.2 (1.3)	4.1 (1.2)	1.97	0.161
Be uninhibited	4.4 (1.4)	4.5 (1.3)	1.83	0.176
Be physically attractive	5.6 (0.6)	5.6 (0.6)	0.000	0.988
Be knowledgeable about sex	4.4 (1.4)	4.3 (1.3)	1.28	0.257
Pay me compliments during sex	4.5 (1.3)	4.7 (1.0)	9.80	0.002
Communicate desires	5.4 (0.9)	5.2 (0.8)	3.26	0.072
Be easily sexually aroused	4.9 (1.0)	4.9 (0.9)	2.04	0.153
Experience orgasm easily	4.7 (1.1)	4.6 (1.2)	0.64	0.421
Like erotic videos, books, magazines	3.6 (1.4)	3.9 (1.3)	5.94	0.015
Take the dominant role during sex	4.4 (1.3)	4.6 (1.2)	2.84	0.092

TABLE III. Comparison between women's ( $n = 137$ ) self-reported preferences for particular characteristics in long-term sex partners and men's ( $n = 289$ ) estimates regarding what they thought women prefer

Partner characteristic	Women's actual Mean (SD)	Men's estimates Mean (SD)	$F$ (1,424)	$P <$
Be open to discussing sex	3.9 (1.3)	4.1 (1.3)	3.06	0.081
Be uninhibited	4.4 (1.3)	4.5 (1.2)	0.35	0.554
Be physically attractive	5.4 (0.7)	5.5 (0.7)	1.82	0.178
Be knowledgeable about sex	4.9 (1.0)	5.4 (0.7)	3.27	0.071
Pay me compliments during sex	4.5 (1.2)	5.0 (1.1)	1.71	0.191
Communicate desires	5.4 (0.8)	5.0 (1.1)	4.64	0.032
Be easily sexually aroused	4.7 (1.0)	4.7 (1.2)	1.03	0.254
Experience orgasm easily	3.8 (1.3)	3.0 (1.6)	5.06	0.025
Like erotic videos, books, magazines	3.5 (1.2)	3.2 (1.4)	3.70	0.055
Take the dominant role during sex	4.8 (0.9)	5.3 (0.9)	0.22	0.639

saying compliments during sex ( $p < 0.002$ ), and like erotic videos and books ( $p < 0.015$ ) (Table II).

The comparison between women's reported preferences and men's rating regarding what they thought woman prefer, showed inaccuracies in two of the ten items. Specifically, men underestimated women's preference for a partner who clearly communicate desires ( $p < 0.03$ ), and experience orgasm easily ( $p < 0.02$ ) (Table III).

## Discussion

In the present study, Greek men valued more highly a sex partner who is physically attractive, easily experiences orgasm, and likes erotic movies or books, while Greek

women valued more highly a sex partner who is experienced in sex, and takes the dominant role during sex. McGuirl and Wiederman (2000), using the same questionnaire in young Americans, have found exactly the same results regarding the men's, and very similar results regarding the women's value for the ideal sex partner. Specifically, women valued more highly a sex partner who is open to discussing sex, offers compliments, and takes the dominant role during sex.

How accurately do men and women perceive the preferences of the other gender? Also, which are the similarities or the differences, in relation to this accuracy, between the Greek and the American subjects? In general, we can suggest more similarities than differences between the two ethnic populations. In the present study, the comparisons between men's reported preferences and women's estimates regarding what they thought men prefer, concluded that women overestimated the degree to which men like a partner saying compliments during sex, and like erotic videos and books. Similarly, McGuirl and Wiederman (2000) have found the same results, plus that the women overestimated men's preference for a partner who is easily sexually aroused, and easily experiences orgasm, and underestimated men's preference for a partner who is open to discussing sex, and clearly communicates her desires. The comparisons of the current study between women's reported preferences and men's ratings regarding what they thought women prefer showed that men underestimated women's preference to communicate clearly his desires, and to easily attain orgasm. Similarly, McGuirl and Wiederman (2000) have found the same results, plus the preference for a sex partner who is open to discussing sex.

The findings of the present study can be discussed in relation to previous findings which have shown in general that, compare to men, women seem to desire more nongenital expressions of affection as well as romantic settings for sexual activity. Specifically, Hatfield *et al.* (1989), studying men and women undergraduates, have found that there were no gender differences with regard to the activities related to love and intimacy, but men indicated more than did women that they wished their partners would exhibit more frequently activities like, being dominant, experimental, variable, and impulsive during sex. In a study investigating whether gender-based differences exist in the rating of sexual words, men and women were not found to be different in their sexual ratings, but men rated a sample of sexually ambiguous words more sexual than women (Plaud *et al.*, 1998). Similarly, a research on gender differences in perceptions of sexual harassment revealed that women perceive a broader range of social-sexual behaviours as harassing (Rotundo *et al.*, 2001). Finally, in a functional magnetic resonance study, investigating the brain activity of male and female subjects while they were viewing erotic film, the hypothalamic activation was found to be significantly greater in male subjects, while the magnitude of hypothalamic activation was positively correlated with reported levels of sexual arousal (Karama *et al.*, 2002).

The findings of the present study may have important implication for sexual counselling or education, because inaccuracy in assessing the other gender may lead to confusion, frustration, and unsatisfying interactions between men and women.

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