Hungry Men Prefer More Mature Women: A Field Test of the Environmental Security Hypothesis

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Presented at the 17th Annual American Psychological Society Convention, Los Angeles, California, May 28, 2005
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The Environmental Security Hypothesis

• Pettijohn & Tesser’s (1999) Environmental Security Hypothesis is a context-dependent theory of attraction and preferences drawing on evolutionary theory and ecology. The theory suggests that when social and economic conditions are threatening, individuals will prefer others with more mature characteristics compared to non-threatening conditions because maturity is associated with the ability to handle threatening situations. Past archival research on American actress Playmate facial and body features (Pettijohn & Jungeberg, 1999), Playboy Playmate facial and body features (Pettijohn & Jungeberg, 2004), as well as experimental studies (Pettijohn & Tesser, in press) have supported this theory.

Introduction

• Ideals of beauty vary depending on culture and time. In cultures where women have limited wealth and financial opportunities, body fat is considered attractive (Anderson et al., 1992). In cultures with abundant resources and opportunities, men prefer thinner women (Furnham & Baguma, 1994). Recently, Nelson and Morrison (2005) conducted a series of creative studies in which they manipulated individual resource scarcity and measured ideal partner body weight preferences. Men who felt hungry or financially threatened expressed a relatively greater preference for heavier females compared to full or financially secure men.

Predictions

• Consistent with the Environmental Security Hypothesis, we predicted that when heterosexual males are hungry (a physiological threat and reminder of resource scarcity), they would show a relatively greater preference for more mature ideal female partners compared to males who are not hungry (full after eating). Females were not expected to show a significant change in preference related to hunger state.

Method

• Participants
  528 college students, 160 men and 168 women

• Materials & Procedure
  Before or after eating at the college dining hall, participants were asked
  • How hungry are you? (scale from 0-10)
  • Ideal partner relative age and relative height
  • Weight, personality, eye size (large or small), and body shape (waist-to-hip ratio) preference

Weight Category Choices

• Male
  < 164 lbs.
  165-169 lbs.
  170-174 lbs.
  175-179 lbs.
  180-184 lbs.
  > 185 lbs.

• Female
  < 114 lbs.
  115-119 lbs.
  120-124 lbs.
  125-129 lbs.
  130-134 lbs.
  > 135 lbs.
Personality Cluster Choices

• Warm, naïve, kind, agreeable
• Strong, mature, independent, competent

Female Eye Size Choices

• Decreased Eye Size
• Increased Eye Size

Male Eye Size Choices

• Decreased Eye Size
• Increased Eye Size

Female Waist-to-Hip Ratio Choices

From Singh (1993) – Average weight models
**Male Waist-to-Hip Ratio Choices**

From Singh (1995) – Average weight models

**Hunger Ratings by Condition**

From Meal

**Relative Age Preference of Ideal Partner by Condition**

**Relative Height Preference of Ideal Partner by Condition**

**Personality Preference of Ideal Partner by Condition**

**Eye Size Preference of Ideal Partner by Condition**
Male Weight Preference of Ideal Female Partner by Condition

\[ \chi^2(5, N=80) = 10.8, p = .055 \]

Female Weight Preference of Ideal Male Partner by Condition

\[ \chi^2(5, N=86) = 5.21, p = .390 \]

Male WHR Preference of Ideal Female Partner by Condition

\[ \chi^2(3, N=160) = 5.11, p = .164 \]

Female WHR Preference of Ideal Male Partner by Condition

\[ \chi^2(3, N=168) = 3.11, p = .374 \]
Results support the predicted hypotheses. Overall, hungry males showed a
predicted pattern of preferences, but results were only statistically significant for
personality and eye size choice. Hunger salience, asking whether participants were
hungry before partner preference questions, strengthened differences between
hungry and full male age preference compared to asking about hunger after
partner preference questions. Hunger salience in the female sample of females to
prefer relatively older males overall compared to the hunger non-salience
condition.

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Male Results Summary

- Overall, hungry males preferred females
  - relatively older, taller, and heavier
  - with mature personality characteristics
- Overall, full males preferred females
  - relatively lighter
  - with larger eyes
- Hunger salience strengthened differences between
  hungry and full male age preference compared to the
  hunger non-salience condition
- No interaction between hunger condition and WHR
  preferences

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Female Results Summary

- Overall, female preferences for age, height, and
  weight were not significantly altered by hunger state,
  but trends in the predicted directions were found
- Overall, hungry and full females preferred males with
  mature personality characteristics
- Overall, hungry females preferred males with smaller
  eye size
- Hunger salience caused females to prefer relatively
  older male partners overall compared to the hunger
  non-salience condition
- No interaction between hunger condition and WHR
  preferences

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Discussion

- Results support the predicted hypotheses. Overall, hungry males showed a
  preference for more mature characteristics in female partners. Females showed the
  predicted pattern of preferences, but results were only statistically significant for
  personality and eye size choice. Hunger salience, asking whether participants were
  hungry before partner preference questions, strengthened differences between
  hungry and full male age preference compared to asking about hunger after
  partner preference questions. Hunger salience in the female sample of females to
  prefer relatively older males overall compared to the hunger non-salience
  condition.
- Although preference differences were small (~1 year in age preference for males,
  ~1") & height preference for males, etc.) these differences were statistically
  significant between hungry and full participants and consistent.
- It is interesting to note that males reported differences in physical features for ideal
  partners and females reported differences in personality characteristic preferences
  for ideal partners. This pattern of results is consistent with evolutionary theories of
  mate preferences.
- Although males and females did not show a change in preferences for waist-to-hip
  ratio in the current study, future studies may see alterations in WHR stimuli.
- Findings extend the Environmental Security Hypothesis and contribute new
  insight into perceptions of beauty and how environmental circumstances can
  influence partner preferences.

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References

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