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Men's sexual activity and perceptions of the facial attractiveness of unknown women

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Prior research indicated that women's greater frequency of sexual activities is associated with perceiving the faces of unknown men as less attractive. In the present study, men aged 18–30 ($n = 126$) reported the frequency of a variety of sexual behaviors and rated the facial attractiveness and friendliness of 24 women. Unlike the results obtained with women, men's recent sexual behaviors were largely unrelated to perceptions of women's faces and this was the case independent of currently being in a stable relationship. There was no indication of confounding with social desirability responding. Results are discussed as consistent with evolutionary psychology predictions and consistent with men being more likely than women to find others attractive, even when satisfied with their primary intimate relationship.

Keywords: sexual behavior; attractiveness; mate choice

Introduction

According to the “good genes” hypothesis, physical attractiveness is a valid marker of overall phenotypic quality (Thornhill & Gangestad, 1999). Women need to balance signs of a man's genetic fitness with signs of his ability and willingness to invest in potential offspring (Gangestad & Simpson, 2000). However, a basic sex difference is that women's investment in a child is far greater than a man's, in part because she can produce approximately one child per year, whereas in theory, given great social success with fertile women, a man could father at least that many per day. Thus, predictions of evolutionary psychology include the notion that men are more attuned to physical attractiveness in a partner than women are and that women's attention to other partners might (on average) decrease once she has a partner of adequate quality. One implication for heterosexual relationships is that men might be more likely than women to find others attractive, even when satisfied with their primary intimate relationship.

A previous study found that women's sexual activity was indeed associated with perceiving unknown men's faces as less attractive (Hess, Brody, van der Schalk, & Fischer, 2007). This contrasts with the non-significant effects in another study (Rupp

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et al., 2009) for both sexes of partnership status in predicting ratings of opposite-sex faces' realism, masculinity, attractiveness or affect. However, that study did find that women without a current sexual partner had longer evaluation times than women who did have partners, an effect not found for men. Given the repeatedly documented association between being sexually attracted to a visual stimulus and longer inspection/evaluation time (Imhoff et al., 2010), there is additional support for the possibility that there are sex differences in the association between sexual activity and finding other persons attractive.

To the best of our knowledge, no study has assessed to what degree individual differences in men's sexual behavior are related to the perception of unknown women. The present study addresses this question and extends the methods previously used to include examination of the possible role of current stable relationship status.

There are many physiological and psychological differences between different sexual activities and a recent review concluded that a wide variety of health benefits are associated specifically, and perhaps exclusively, with the one potentially reproductive sexual behavior, penile-vaginal intercourse (Brody, 2010b). Similarly, multivariate analysis of nationally representative data revealed that frequency of penile-vaginal intercourse, but not of other sexual behaviors, is positively associated with greater sexual, partnership and life satisfaction for both sexes (Brody & Costa, 2009). Thus, it is important to examine different sexual behaviors separately. It is also of value to examine whether respondents might be at elevated risk of misreporting sensitive behaviors, by using a measure of social desirability responding (Brody, 2010b).

We hypothesized that unlike for women, men's sexual activities would not be associated with perceived attractiveness of unknown women and we also hypothesized that having a current stable partnership would also have no effect on perceived attractiveness of unknown women.

Methods

Subjects

French-Canadian men ($n = 126$) with a mean age of 22 years (range 18–30) participated individually in private (using an anonymous online survey). Participants were recruited in classrooms at the University of Quebec, Montreal, as well as individually. Ethical approval from the ethics committee of the University of Quebec at Montreal was obtained. Participants were aware of their right to discontinue participation at any time. The age range was the same as in the previous study of women (Hess et al., 2007) and the sample size was approximately three times as large, so as to allow for a greater than 0.80 power to detect a less than 0.25 correlation (two-tailed, $\alpha = .05$) (Faul, Erdfelder, Buchner, & Lang, 2009).

Stimuli

A total of 24 pictures of women (12 from Quebec and 12 from Gabon) showing a neutral facial expression from the Montreal Set of Facial Displays of Emotion (Beaupré & Hess, 2005) served as stimuli for all participants.

Individual difference measures

Sexual behaviors

Frequencies of sexual behaviors were assessed by asking for how many days in the past month each of the behaviors occurred and how often the men had experienced orgasms from each behavior: penile-vaginal intercourse, masturbation, partner-performed masturbation and receiving fellatio. The behavior assessment schedule has been shown to be valid for the assessment of individual differences in sexual behaviors in international studies examining the relationship of different sexual behaviors to components of partnership satisfaction, emotional maturity and psychophysiological function (Brody, 2006, 2010a; Brody & Costa, 2008; Brody & Preut, 2003; Costa & Brody, 2007, 2008; Hess et al., 2007). The men were also asked if they were currently in a stable partnership.

Social desirability

To assess social desirability responding, the French version of a brief social desirability response bias scale (Ballard, 1992) was employed.

Dependent measures

Participants rated each woman on two 7-point scales, anchored with 1 = not at all and 7 = very much, with regard to how friendly and attractive they considered the woman to be.

Results

There was no indication of confounding with social desirability responding. Pearson correlations were used to assess the relation between individual differences in frequency of sexual behaviors and perceptions of facial attractiveness and friendliness. As hypothesized, none of the sexual behavior correlations with attractiveness reached statistical significance (all $p > .05$, all $|r| < .16$), despite adequate statistical power. Similarly non-significant results with attractiveness were obtained when the sample was stratified by current relationship status ($n = 65$ in a stable relationship). Essentially, similarly non-significant results were obtained for perceived friendliness, except that for the combined (but not stratified) sample, frequency of orgasm from fellatio was associated with perceiving women as less friendly ($p = .02$; $r = -.21$).

Discussion

As hypothesized, men's frequency of various specific sexual behaviors and orgasmic responses were not significantly associated with perceived attractiveness of unknown women's faces. This differs from the results obtained for women's sexual activities and their perception of unknown men's facial attractiveness (Hess et al., 2007) and we interpret this result as consistent with evolutionary psychological predictions. The one nominally statistically significant association in the present study was that men's frequency of orgasm from fellatio was associated with perceiving unknown women as less friendly. Although one might be tempted to interpret this finding, we choose

to view it as a random result, given that it was the only one of 16 (or, given the stratification by relationship status analyses, 48) analyses that was significant at the 5% level.

The results were not confounded by social desirability responding. As in the previous study of women, our sample consisted of young (age 18–30) adults and it is unclear to what extent the results apply to other age groups.

Overall, the present study shows that even when men are sexually active, they maintain similar judgments of what constitutes female facial attractiveness. This result differs from findings with women performing a comparable task and can be understood to reflect sex differences in potential reproductive rates. The results would also be consistent with men being more likely than women to find others attractive, even when satisfied with their primary intimate relationship. Future research informed by evolutionary psychology theory and research methods might be of significant value to sex and relationship therapy.

Notes on contributors

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