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HEIGHT AS A BASIS FOR INTERPERSONAL ATTRACTION

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ABSTRACT

Beginning with the observation of a male-taller basis in date/mate selection, this study investigated a complementary vs. a step function in choosing a dating partner. In addition, the relative advantages or disadvantages of height were examined for both genders in the dating marketplace. Our sample of college students (N = 594) indicated that while we may use a complementary standard in hypothetical date selection, the actual height of a chosen person is more likely to be made on a step function. Second, there appears to be no dating consequences for a female in a height-related sense, but taller males do enjoy a noticeable dating advantage. Finally, there appears to be a "ceiling effect" demonstrated here for the first time; the height advantage for a male seems to diminish when he is taller than six feet. Suggestions are offered which integrate the present findings into past research.

American society appears to operate on the basis of a series of unstated yet pervasive social rules in date/mate selection. Not the least of these implicit criteria is the male-taller bias. The unwritten law of social interaction seems to be that the male must be at least as tall or taller than the female in order for any meaningful relationship to develop (Cameron, Oskamp, & Sparks, 1977; Martel & Biller, 1987; Graziano, Brothen, & Berscheid, 1978). As a case in point, Gillis and Avis (1980) calculated that the male should be shorter than the female in 2 of every 100 couples based on random chance. Their data showed this configuration actually occurred only once among 720 couples, thus, it is abundantly clear that the male-taller bias is in full operation, but what is not clear is the psychological selection process used in abiding by this "Cardinal principle" of date selection (Berscheid & Walster, 1974). On what basis do males select shorter females and how do females select taller males? At least two different techniques are apparent.

First, it is possible that there is a comparative standard by which one's own height serves as the anchor. Females, for example, would favor males who are two or three inches taller than themselves. Males, on the other hand, would favor females two or three inches shorter

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than themselves. This selection rule would produce a *complementary* partner. Widely followed, the complementary selection rule would produce a uniformity of couples. Knowing the height of one partner would enable an observer to predict the height of the other partner. Complementarity should produce a fairly strong relationship between one's own height and the height of one's chosen partner.

However, it is possible that a far less complex standard could be involved. Females using a simpler standard might find any male acceptable as long as he were as tall or taller than themselves. Males might accept any female as long as she were as tall or shorter than themselves. This selection rule operates on a simple *step* function. Even though the male is still taller than the female among such couples, the differences between them is now more haphazard. Using the step function, a weak but still positive relationship should exist between one's own height and the height of one's chosen partner.

However, both of these hypothesized selection rules may be confounded by the failure to distinguish between what is desirable and what is obtainable. Hence, both selection techniques must be examined for the real and the ideal situation.

Turning to a related question of date/mate selection, there is a logical possibility that because of the male-taller bias, a distinct social advantage should be observable for taller males (Martell & Biller, 1987; Lerner & Moore, 1974). Indeed, in a field study such a finding has been suggested (Feingold, 1982) when it was observed that as the height of the male increased, so did the attractiveness ratings of his girlfriend. But another study seems to suggest that women are more attracted to men of medium height (5′9″ to 5′11″") than to either short or tall men (Graziano et al., 1978). Thus, an additional purpose of this study was to investigate the presumed social advantage for tall men.

By extension of the same logic, it should also be the case that shorter females would enjoy a social advantage in the date/mate situation. By being short, the female becomes a socially appropriate partner for a much larger pool of males than does her taller counterpart. Thus, height alone should enhance the short females' dating/mating prospects in the social marketplace.

In sum, this study sought to examine the complementary vs. the step function in the selection of the ideal and real dating partner. Second, the presumed social advantages for tall males and short females in interpersonal interaction situations were examined.

METHOD

Subjects in this study ($N = 594$) were volunteers from communication classes taught at a large mid-Atlantic university. A questionnaire

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designed to assess respondent height, present relationship status, height preference for an ideal partner, and other factors was administered.

RESULTS

Prior research suggests that being involved with another person subtly alters one's perception of the ideal until that ideal image comes to resemble the real person (Bailey & Kelly, 1984). For that reason, the analysis begins with only those males who reported that they were not currently involved with a girlfriend. The correlation between uninvolved males' height and the height of their ideal partners was quite high ($N = 164$; $r = .51$; $r^2 = .26$). Compared with that correlation was the correlation of involved male heights with the reported height of their actual girlfriends. That correlation was substantially less ($N = 110$; $r = .25$; $r^2 = .06$). The difference between these two correlations was highly significant ($t = 3.53$; $p < .001$). Among males, these data suggest that prior to involvement, the idealized picture is one of complementarity. Actual involvement uses a simple step function.

The story is much the same for females. Uninvolved females' height is strongly related to the envisaged heights of their ideals ($N = 145$; $r = .57$; $r^2 = .33$). The same correlation for involved female heights with the heights of their boyfriends is much lower ($N = 171$; $r = .25$; $r^2 = .06$). Once again the difference between these two correlations is highly significant ($t = 3.51$; $p < .001$). For females, as for males, the step function is the more accurate depiction of real life.

Finally, there is the question of whether the presence of actual involvement significantly affected the image of an ideal. Among involved males and females is there a strong positive relationship between the ideal partner and the real partner? For both males ($N = 109$; $r = .69$; $r^2 = .47$) and females ($N = 170$; $r = .51$; $r^2 = .26$) the answer appears to be yes.

The answer to the initial question seems to be that when we look for a prospective partner for dating and potential marriage, the standard is that of complementary height. The compromises of the world appear to drive us in the direction of a simpler step function in terms of height for our actual selection. The confusions of the past may have been due to the lack of attention paid to the present involvement status of respondents. These data clearly suggest that this would be a serious oversight.

The second set of hypotheses in this study concerns the presumed social advantages which accrue to tall males and to short females. Here the self-reported heights may be compared with the reported

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heights of the involved others. The 276 males, for instance, may be compared with the 171 boyfriends described by our female population. If male height plays no role in attraction, the reported heights of the boyfriends should closely parallel that of our sample population. Examination of Table 1, dividing the heights into one standard deviation above and below the mean, illustrates that taller males appear in almost twice the proportion we would expect. This finding is highly significant whether measured by a standard chi-square ($\chi^2 = 12.80$; $p < .002$) or with the more powerful Kolmogorov-Smirnov test ($\chi^2 = 10.22$; $p < .01$).

The same procedure followed for females demonstrates only a very close approximation to the population parameters ($\chi^2 = 1.87$; $p < .39$). The hypothesized social advantage for shorter females is nonexistent in this study.

DISCUSSION

These results aid us in understanding the conflicts in the past literature. If taller men enjoy a dating advantage, that advantage may translate into more and varied social experience, thereby enabling them to be more selective in the dating marketplace. Hence, Feingold (1982) was probably correct; taller men may indeed have prettier girlfriends given their social advantage of height. It is also the case that several other confusing findings now fit into place. Gunderson (1965) reported that naval personnel assigned to a medium-sized aircraft carrier (the sample size was not reported, but it was presumably large), expressed the opinion that 72 inches (183 cm) was the optimal desired height. Ironically, 72 inches is the mean height for an ideal male

Table 1

Comparison of Male Sample with Boyfriend's Heights

	Heights		
Groups	Short(-1σ)	Medium	Tall(+1σ)
	5' 7" -	5'8" to 6'1"	6' 2"+
Sample	29 (10.5%)	207(75%)	40(14.5%)
Boyfriends	12(7%)	111(64.9%)	48(28.1%)

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reported by the uninvolved females in this study. Moreover, the standard deviation of the preferred height is so small ($\alpha = .20$) that the preference for a six-foot-tall male is overwhelming. Of the 145 uninvolved females, 46 (32%) report that six feet is the ideal height for a male.

The Graziano et al. study (1978) is also brought into clearer focus. The researchers in that study were mystified when women seemed to prefer medium height men (5′9″ to 5′11″) to either short men (5′5″ to 5′7″) or tall men (6′2″ to 6′4″). Graziano and his colleagues erroneously assumed that taller males are ipso facto more attractive. In light of the results found here, there is clearly a "ceiling effect"; at some point taller is not better for males. Graziano encountered the ceiling. Using the same categories proposed by Graziano, the same results may be replicated with the preference of uninvolved females; 3 (2%) preferred short males, 40 (28%) preferred medium height males, while tall males were chosen by 34 (23%). Note, however, that the medium category is the closest approximation to the real choice of six feet.

These results are all the more impressive since there is abundant evidence that height and intelligence are covariants (Douglas, Ross, & Simpson, 1965; Klein, Freeman, Kagan, Yarbrough, & Habicht, 1972; McManus & Mascie-Taylor, 1983; Richards, Marshall, & Kreuser, 1985; Wilson et al., 1986). In essence, the sample used here has imposed a de facto partial for intelligence on the data. By using college students, we have limited the variability of intelligence and have no doubt reduced the true magnitude of the effects we sought to investigate. The fact that any results have emerged at all is a testament to the power of the underlying phenomenon. These reflections serve to lend more credence to our findings.

In summary, then, a number of findings have emerged from the present study. First, while we may ideally want a complementary height partner, we often settle for one whose height meets rather simple basic requirements; for females, taller than she; for males, shorter than he.

Second, height apparently does not pose a strong social advantage or disadvantage for women.

Third, there is apparently a "ceiling effect" in interpersonal attractiveness for the male. These data suggest that taller is not always better and that at some point, the advantage of male height may become a disadvantage. Obviously, that conclusion is tentative at present, but it is clearly a matter for future investigation.

Finally, within the limits described by the ceiling effect, being taller does appear to be a social advantage for males. But contrary to the expectation of symmetry, it is not necessarily that the shorter male is disadvantaged, but that taller males enjoy an increased social advan-

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tage. Our social destiny may not be written in the stars, but in the case of taller males, it has apparently been penciled in on our genes. Over a decade ago when Berschied and Walster (1974) wrote that height "may account for a fair portion of the attractiveness variance, particularly in men . . ." (p. 178), they had no idea how accurate their observation was or how long it would take to demonstrate its validity.

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