

Does Height Matter? An Examination of Height Preferences in Romantic Coupling

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Abstract

Amidst increasingly equality in belief and in practice between the sexes, we ask if height preferences still matter, and if so, why people say they matter. First, we collected data from Yahoo! dating personal advertisements. Second, we used answers to open-ended questions in an online survey. The Yahoo! data document that height is still important in decisions to date but that it is more important to females than to males. Results from the online survey indicate that women wanted tall men for a variety of reasons, but most of the explanations of our respondents were connected to societal expectations or gender stereotypes. Gender-based legitimation of height preferences seem to be more central than evolutionary-based legitimation, but future work may discover a more nuanced interpretation.

Keywords

dating/relationship formation, online dating, mate selection, height preference, gender and family

In heterosexual romantic relationships, does the height of partners matter? And if so, *why* does it matter? In this article, we explore these questions using

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primary data collected specifically for the topic at hand. We seek to see if in an age of increasingly equality in belief and in practice between the sexes, if height preferences still matter, and again, most important, why people say they matter. Doing so helps us gain both theoretical and practical insight into the world of mate selection.

Evolutionary psychology theory argues that “similarity is overwhelmingly the rule in human mating” (Buss & Schmitt, 1993, p. 205). And on most social factors—such as ethnicity, religion, and region—similarity does indeed seem to be the driving factor (Blackwell & Lichter, 2004; Joyner & Kao, 2005; Robnett & Feliciano, 2011). But for physical features such as sex and height, similarity may not be the dominant rule. As such, factors such as height may come to be associated with gender roles, and can thus be used to gain acceptance via conformity to expected gender roles. In this article, we seek to understand the height preferences of heterosexuals, and what theoretical factors are driving these preferences.

Background

Relatively few studies on height preferences exist. To date, the samples used in the Western world come from seven nations (United States, Germany, Austria, England, Canada, France, and Poland). Some key patterns have been found across these Western cultures: (a) females prefer men who are taller than average; (b) most studies find that a female’s height is positively correlated with her preference for a male mate’s height; and (c) women’s preferred difference in height seems to be greatest for shorter women. For men, the results are less consistent, but men (d) do prefer women shorter than themselves (or at least not taller); (e) the taller a man is, the taller the women he prefers; and (f) men tend to rate shorter woman as more attractive (Courtiol, Raymond, Godelle, & Ferdy, 2010; Fink, Neave, Brewer, & Pawlowski, 2007; Pawlowski, 2003; Pierce, 1996; Salska et al., 2008; Shepperd & Strathman, 1989; Swami, Furnham, Balakumar, Williams, & Canaway, 2008). These preferences seem to translate into realized mate selection. Gillis and Avis (1980), using actual height data from bank account applications of 720 cases, found that in only one case was the male shorter than the female.

But the female preference for taller males may not be universal. In a study of the seminomadic Himba ethnic group of Namibia (Sorokowski, Sorokowska, Fink, & Mberira, 2012), the authors found interesting results. Based on having their respondents evaluate and rate six pairs of male–female partners that ranged from the man being significantly taller than the women to the woman being slightly taller than the man, the largest proportion of males (31%) had a preference for men and women being of equal height. The

second largest proportion (21%) favored the woman being slightly taller than the man. Perhaps even more surprisingly, the largest proportion of females (34%) had a preference for men and women being of equal height. The remainder of Himba female responses indicated 52% with a preference of the man taller than the women with about 32% preferring significantly taller men, 20% preferring slightly taller men and 14% having a preference for the woman being slightly taller than the man.

Another study (Sear & Marlowe, 2009), examining the relative height of actual marriage partners of the Hazda in Tanzania, found that in 8.2% of the 207 analyzed marriages, the wife was taller than the husband. This is the percentage of such coupling that one would expect from chance, if height was not a factor in coupling. And this finding is dramatically different from Western societies, where wives are taller than their husbands far less than chance would suggest.

Sorokowski et al. (2012) speculate that the findings provide an important clue to height preferences. Because lower height in humans can result from poor nutrition, disease, sickness, or substantial stress, lower height may be a clue of poorer health, fewer resources during development, and higher likelihood of producing offspring small in stature. This pattern may help explain why in resource poor environments such as Northern Namibia (home of the Himba) or Tanzania do not reflect the Western patterns as clearly (see also Pisanski & Feinberg, 2013).

We must attend to biology. Across cultures, males are taller than females and in the United States, the height ratio of men to women is generally 1.09 (McDowell, Fryar, Ogden, & Flegal, 2008). That ratio translates into roughly a difference of about a 6-inch average height advantage for males. There is also a relatively consistent height difference between the sexes across the world's regions that seems rooted in evolutionary history (Gray & Wolfe, 1980; Nettle, 2002). *Why* this difference exists may itself be part of the "height preference" puzzle. One explanation for the female/male height gap is that women developed a bias for taller men because of the indirect benefits that arise from mating with these men, such as the tendency to pass on genetic predispositions for height, health, and greater reproductive outcomes on to offspring (Pawlowski, Dunbar, & Lipowicz, 2000; Salska et al., 2008). A second explanation is that women developed a bias for taller men because of their direct benefits that can be passed on to the children, such as greater resources, security, and protection (Judge & Cable, 2004).

A third possibility focuses on males. Taller males may have developed through the increased ability to dominate other males, excluding them from resources and mates (Puts, 2010). Conversely, a fourth possibility focuses not on why males are taller than females on average, but why females are shorter

on average than males. Given the increased caloric demands of reproduction—pregnancy, childbirth, lactation—shorter females have advantages in that they require less calories than taller females. In fact, feminist primatologist Sarah Hrdy (1999) puts it this way as the title of her book: “The Woman That Never Evolved.”

The general case of height preference also has its limits. Importantly, recent experimental work on height preferences (Courtiol et al., 2010) found an inverted U-shape to the height preferences of both males and females. This shape indicates that although women prefer taller men, and men prefer shorter women, both sets of preferences are bounded. It seems that some men are too tall for most women’s preferences, and some women are too short for some men’s preferences.

It is not only absolute height that matters; so too does relative height, typically called the sexual dimorphism ratio (SDR). Several studies (e.g., Courtiol et al., 2010; Salska et al., 2008; Swami et al., 2008) have found that taller women are more likely to relax the requirement that the man be taller than her. Tall women do not necessarily say they would accept a male shorter than them, but they are more likely to say it would be acceptable for the male to be of the same height. For short men, they are more likely than tall men to say they would be willing to date women who are their height or even slightly taller. The literature explains these patterns as an attempt by tall women and short men to maximize their mate pool. Fink et al. (2007), Pawlowski (2003), and Pierce (1996) suggest that what matters most is the SDR rather than the absolute height differential. That is, they posit that women are not looking for the tallest man possible, just one who is ideally a few inches taller than she is.

Interestingly, a few studies hypothesized that apart from the height of the respondent, their stated gender role norms would be associated with height requirements. Specifically, those espousing more traditional gender role norms would be more likely to prefer that the man be taller than the woman. At best, these studies found weak associations, and usually the various gender roles scales were not significantly correlated with preference that the male be taller than the female (Salska et al., 2008; Swami et al., 2008).

Although the research done to date coalesces around some key findings, they all lack an important component. None of these studies ask the respondents *why* they have the height preferences they do. Existing studies merely generate theory a priori (at best) or post hoc explanations to account for the findings. Several theories have been offered, but they can be summarized into two dominant groupings:

“Good Genes”/Evolutionary Biology/Psychology: Taller men will have greater reproductive success, tallness signifies the ability to intimidate

potential rivals, to protect others, and to secure resources (e.g., in the modern context, Jaeger [2011] finds that taller males earn higher incomes than shorter males throughout the life course). The preponderance of theory and explanations come from this perspective.

Gender Roles/Stereotypes: Traditionally, in western societies at least, men are supposed to be taller than their female partners. Tallness indicates that the man is in charge, and is the provider. Thus, to have a relationship in which the man is not taller violates social expectations, and thus can open the subjects up to ridicule (Swami et al., 2008; Tovee, Swami, Furnham, & Mangalparsad, 2006).

Theory and empirical work acknowledge differences in mate selection criteria. Women are choosier about more mate characteristics (Buss & Schmitt, 1993; Salska et al., 2008), even for short-term relationships (Buss & Schmitt, 1993). These scholars argue that such results are consistent with evolutionary biology and psychology theories. Alternatively, social exchange theories (Stewart, Stinnett, & Rosenfeld, 2000) claim that women favor men with greater access to resources, such as status and power. Because of gender roles/stereotypes perspective, on average taller men are afforded greater status and power. Combined, these theories and findings suggest that height will be more important to more women than to men.

As with previous studies, we too will examine whether heterosexual females and males have height preferences for their mates, and if so, what exactly those preferences are. But unlike other studies, for the first time, we explore why in the respondents' own words they express the preferences they do. Although this method is not perfect (we doubt women will know or say they prefer taller men because they are predisposed through thousands of years to queue into the expectation that taller men will have access to greater resources, have greater health to pass on to offspring, and have better ability to dominate), it is a step forward in better considering the theories offered for the role of height in mate preference.

Data

We used two data sources to investigate the role of height in dating decisions. First, we collected data from Yahoo! dating personal advertisements collected in June of 2005. There are other personal advertisements that we could have used (i.e., Christian Mingle, Lavalife), but they tend to cater to certain dating pool niches. Yahoo! attracts a wide range of individuals and both Orr (2004) and Robnett and Feliciano (2011) maintain that it is the dating website used the most by online daters. It can be argued that Match.com also is a

website that does not cater to a niche market; however, at the time of data collection it had not yet merged with Yahoo! and was not used as much as the Yahoo! website. Previous researchers have used Internet personal advertisements to explore dynamics of romantic relationships (Dawson & McIntosh, 2006; Glasser, Robnett, and Feliciano, 2009; McIntosh, Locker, Briley, Ryan, & Scott, 2011; Morgan, Richards, & VanNess, 2010; Yancey, 2009). Furthermore, Lynn and Bolig (1985) have pointed out important advantages of newspaper personal advertisements which also apply to Internet personal advertisements. They point out that such advertisements provide insightful information because (a) the subjects do not know they are being studied; (b) the subjects are being studied in a natural, and not experimental setting; and (c) the subjects tend to be representative of the general population.

The Yahoo! website allows potential daters to search as far as 250 miles from any given city. The search engine was set so that there were no restrictions on the potential daters. Even advertisements without pictures were included as possible respondents. We used the General Social Survey categories to create nine regions (Pacific, Mountain, West South Central, West North Central, East South Central, East North Central, New England, South Atlantic, and Middle Atlantic). The largest city in each region was automatically selected. The rest of the cities were divided up into those with at least 25,000 inhabitants and those with less than 25,000 inhabitants. The 25,000 inhabitant cutoff was used for convenience since the Census data provided the listing of all cities over 25,000. Three cities were randomly chosen from the first group and five cities were randomly chosen from the second group. From the largest city in the region the first 40 dater profiles listed were chosen (20 men and 20 women). From each medium size city (more than 25,000 inhabitants, but not the largest city in the region) 10 dater profiles were chosen (5 men and 5 women). From each small city (less than 25,000 inhabitants) 4 profiles were chosen (2 men and 2 women). If a particular city did not have any dater profiles on Yahoo, then an appropriate size city in the region was randomly chosen to take its place. This resulted in a sample of 455 males and 470 females.

All the advertisements used are of individuals seeking heterosexual relationships. This minimizes the possibility that the sample is complicated by possible sexual preferences differences. However, it is possible that some bisexuals are included in the sample. The sample is not random but is a good approximation of heterosexual individuals as Sautter, Tippett, and Morgan (2006) find that individuals who date online do not greatly differ in sex, race, age, education, income, and religiosity from the general population once Internet use and marital status are controlled. Thus, we have a quantitative data source that allows us to assess the importance of height in the decisions

Table 1. Selected Demographic and Social Variables of Internet Dating Sample (N = 925).

Percentage male	49.2
Average age, years	36.36
Percentage never married	57.5
Percentage divorced	35.7
Percentage widowed/separated	6.8
Percentage White	70.6
Percentage Black	15.3
Percentage Other race	14.2
Percentage bachelor's degree or above	49.1
Percentage <\$35,000 income	32.8
Percentage >\$100,000 income	10.3
Percentage Christian	75.4

individuals make when they seek a romantic encounter. The Yahoo! website had a category for respondents to indicate their height. Only six respondents in our sample (three men and three women) did not report their height. The website also had a category where the respondents could indicate the height desire of their potential date. This category had a range of 3 feet to 8 feet and the respondents could also indicate that they had no height preference. Only three respondents (one man and two women) did not indicate their height preference. Selected demographic and social characteristics of this sample can be seen in Table 1.

The second data source is based on answers to open-ended questions in an online survey. College students made up the sample for this survey. College students are often used in research because of their relatively easy availability as potential subjects. However, this comes with the weakness in that they are not a representative sample. This is obviously true in our sample as it concerns age and educational attainment. We had a limited amount of other demographic variables in our local sample so a complete comparison of the local sample with the national sample is not possible. However, we did find that the national sample had a significantly higher percentage of White respondents than our local sample (70.6% vs. 55.6%; $p < .001$).

To collect our sample, the survey was described to individuals in several classes in an author's home university, which is a large, public university. The students were then sent a link by which they could access the online survey. To provide incentive for students to finish the survey, all respondents who completed surveys were entered into a drawing for three 100 dollar gift cards. We opened the survey to all students but our final sample only included

individuals who indicated that they were not married and that they were exclusively heterosexual. This resulted in a sample of 54 males and 131 females. A full 96% of the respondents are younger than 29 years.

Respondents were asked about their own race, age, sex and height. Furthermore, they were asked to rate the importance of height in whom they would like to date with the question: "What physical qualities are important TO YOU when it comes to selecting someone to date?" we used a 7-point scale where they could rate height as *not important* (rated as 1) to *extremely important* (rated as 7). But as it concerned height the respondents were asked, "When it comes to dating, what is the height of the shortest person that you are willing to date? (in feet and inches, i.e., 5 feet, 10 inches)." We then followed up with an open-ended question: "Why do you not want to date someone shorter than that?" A total of 166, or 89.7% of the respondents provided an answer to this question. The average answer was 19.2 ($SD = 15.3$; $Mdn = 16$) words long. We then asked, "When it comes to dating, what is the height of the tallest person that you are willing to date? (in feet and inches, i.e., 5 feet, 10 inches)." We then followed up with an open-ended question: "Why do you not want to date someone taller than that?" A total of 163, or 88.1% of the respondents provided an answer to this question. The average answer was 15.0 ($SD = 12.1$; $Mdn = 12$) words long. Finally we followed up with an open-ended question: "Why is height important, or unimportant, to you when you select someone to date?" In all, 169, or 91.4% of the respondents provided an answer to this question. The average answer was 22.0 ($SD = 14.2$; $Mdn = 19$) words long.

We used an open coding technique where we attempted to approach the responses without preconceived notions. In this way, we could let the themes develop from the data regardless of whether they fit into our theoretical constructs. Responses to the short answer questions were coded according to the issues that the respondent brought up as he or she discussed about whether and why height was important in romantic choices. After coding a few of the answers certain themes began to repeat themselves. We then developed codes with those themes and documented which respondents exhibited those themes. Multiple themes often came from single answers as these themes were not exclusive of each other. The major themes we discovered and the frequency in which they came up in our sample, by sex, can be seen in Table 2. The respondent was coded as exhibiting one of those themes if it was brought up in any of the three open-ended questions.

Nine major themes emerged from our coding. Protection/Security refers to the respondent discussing the desire for protection or security connected to desires for certain height. Attraction refers to the respondent discussing attraction for a given height. Society refers to the respondent discussing

Table 2. Frequencies of Themes in Responses to Short Answer Questions, by Sex (N = 185).

	Male (%)	Female (%)	Total (%)
Protection/Security	1.9	25.2 ^a	18.4
Attraction	24.1	27.5	26.5
Society	11.1	13.0	12.4
Physical Difficulties	22.2	31.3	28.6
Heels	0.0	10.7 ^a	7.6
Look Down/Up	7.4	10.7	9.7
Power in Relationship	3.7	12.2	9.7
Awkward/Weird	27.8	29.0	28.6
Masculinity/Femininity	0.0	6.9 ^b	4.9

a. Male significantly different from female at $p < .001$.

b. Male significantly different from female at $p < .05$.

social norms on height. Physical Difficulties refers to the respondent discussing a fear of physical difficulties in expressing affection or sexual desire due to the height of dating partner. Heels refers to respondent discussing the wearing of high heel shoes in relation to height desires. Look Down/Up refers to respondent discussing a desire to look up or down at dating partner. Power in Relationship refers to respondent linking height to whether the male or female has the most power in the relationship. Awkward/Weird refers to respondent discussing feeling awkward or weird being with someone outside his or her height range. Masculinity/Femininity refers to respondents wanting individuals inside height range to feel more masculine or feminine. All responses were coded by an undergraduate student who was given the previously produced themes. Her coding was compared with the coding of the lead author. Agreement of the two codings for the individual variables varied from a high of 99.4% to a low of 79.4% with an average agreement rate of 91.7% ($SD = 5.6$). The lowest scores centered on the variable that made up the themes of Attraction and Awkward/Weird. These may be more subjective than the other themes and vulnerable to the sex difference between the author and the research assistant. Given that none of the major findings use either of these themes, the relatively lower levels of agreement in these themes do not detract from those findings. In the few cases where there was disagreement we used the original researcher's coding since he was in a better position to understand the aim of the research. There are sufficiently high interrater reliability scores to have confidence in the viability of the variables used in constructing these themes.

Once all the responses were coded we used correlational analysis to determine if certain groups, based on sex and height, were more likely to adopt certain themes in explaining how height factored into their romantic decisions. However, the value of these data goes beyond such correlations, as we can read the respondents' reasoning for height preference in his or her own words.

Results

The gender difference in the importance of height is confirmed by our research. We weighted the data in the Internet dating sample to the 2000 census to account for regional, city size, and racial makeup of the country. After this weighting, a *t* test indicates that women—as theory and previous research suggest—are more likely to indicate that height matters in seeking a date than men (57.1% vs. 40.0%; $p < .001$; $t = 7.9$; degrees of freedom = 2,064; Cohen's $d = .35$). It is also worth noting who did *not* care about the height of their date. Among men greater height is positively correlated with stating that they will date women of any height ($r = .14$; $p < .01$; $n = 452^1$) whereas the opposite is true for women: Greater height was negatively correlated with stating that they will date men of any height ($r = -.07$; $p < .05$; $n = 466$). Even though these effects are small, they are significant, confirming the reality of the gender effect of height. For example, among men, only 1.3% want to only date women taller than them whereas 13.5% want to only date women shorter than them. But among women 1.7% wanted to only date men shorter than them whereas 48.9% wanted to only date men taller than them.

Our local sample confirmed these findings. On a 7-point scale, with higher numbers indicating more importance given to height for dating, women scored higher than men (4.43 vs. 3.63; $p < .01$). Just as with our national sample, we also find in the local sample that height is more important for taller women and shorter men. The importance-of-height variable is negatively correlated with the height of men ($r = -.31$; $p < .01$) but it is positively correlated with the height of women ($r = .27$; $p < .01$). Furthermore, none of the men only wanted to date women taller than them nor did any of the women only wanted to date men shorter than them. However, 37% of the men only wanted to date women shorter than them and 55% of the women only wanted to date men taller than them. As it concerns the propensity to use one's own height as an upper or lower limit for dating, the local sample has a stronger propensity than the national sample. Despite the notable social and demographic differences between the two samples, there are general height preferences that transcend those variations in age, education, and race. Although we have less confidence in the

generalizability of the local sample on its own merit, the similarity of the findings in the local sample to the online personal advertisement sample provides us more assurance that the qualitative results in the local sample are not anomalous to that sample. The distinctive demographics between the local and national sample offer evidence that these results are not limited to a few particular social groups.

The statistics of both data sets suggest powerful gender differences in why height is important in dating decisions. It stands to reason that there are differing motivations between men and women for their height preferences. However, beyond the sex difference one may also expect that preferences differ between tall and short men as well as between tall and short women. There may be an interaction of actual height and sex that helps to determine a dater's attitude toward height. Previous scholars have looked at theories of acceptable SDR, or the ratio of men's height to women's height desired in romantic couplings, to gain an understanding of gender differences in height preferences. For example, some have argued that tall men and short women are more tolerant of larger SDR than their peers (Salska et al., 2008; Swami et al., 2008). Our national survey data reinforce this argument. We calculated the range that daters are willing to tolerate as it concerns height by subtracting their lower height range from their upper height range. For men the size of this range was positively correlated with their height ($r = .098$; $p < .01$) whereas this relationship was negative with women ($r = -.086$; $p < .01$), indicating that taller men and shorter women have wider acceptable SDR ranges than shorter men and taller women.

It has also been suggested that the SDR expectations of females lead to a preference for men who are taller than average, but the SDR expectations of males lead to preferences for an average height woman (Courtiol et al., 2010; Swami et al., 2008). We calculated the average of the respondents' shortest and highest height range. This created a measure for the average height desired for each respondent. The average height desired for men is 64.48 inches, which is comparable to the average height of women in the United States of 63.8 inches (McDowell et al., 2008). The average height desired for women is 69.45 inches, which is comparable with the average height of men in the United States of 69.4 inches (McDowell et al., 2008). Our data suggest that both men and women have realistic height expectations of prospective dating partners.

Our analysis of the answers students provided in the open-ended questions confirmed these assertions. Immediately we saw gender differences in the importance of height for a potential dating partner. For example, it is worth noting that in all the themes documented in Table 2 our female respondents always, although not always significantly, mentioned the concerns of

a particular theme more than men. This can be a proxy for the reality that discussing the height of potential dates is more important to women than it is to men. Nevertheless there are other critical gender differences that should be noted. When asked about why they had minimum height requirements for who they are willing to date, women discussed several issues connected with a traditional gender expectation for men. For example, these young women discussed looking to taller men to feel protected or secure:

... height factors into security for me. When a man is taller I feel more protected and secure. (5 feet 4 inches "Other race"² woman)

Although I am short, I am not attracted to short men. I could meet the most attractive man, but if he is not at least 5' 7, I am not interested. Tall men represent protection. I feel safe for some reason. (5 feet 1 inches White woman)

In Table 2, we find that nearly a fourth of the women discussed the desire for protection or security in at least one of their answers whereas barely any men discussed issues of protection or security. It is a clear gender difference in the data. The desire to look up or down into a date's eyes was not as great of a gender difference. But when our female respondents discussed this theme, it was generally the desire to look into a taller man's eyes that they wanted. In a sense they desired to "look up" to their date:

As the girl I like to feel delicate and secure at the same time. Something just feels weird in thinking about looking "down" into my man's eyes. There is also something to be said about being able to wear shoes with high heels and still being shorter. I also want to be able to hug him with my arms reaching up and around his neck. (5 feet 3 inches White woman)

It's always been my personal preference to be able to look up into a guy's eyes instead seeing him face to face. (5 feet 5 inches "Other race" woman)

This need to feel the man is taller may be tied to another characteristic that came out of our data. Some of the women sometimes felt the need to feel small compared with her partner in order to feel more "feminine." For example, one respondent (5 feet inches Hispanic woman) noted that "... if a guy is too short or shorter than me, it makes me feel less feminine." The average male is biologically taller and larger than the average female so it is not surprising that the females in our sample expected to date taller, larger men. However, the desire to date taller men to gain a perception of femininity seems a social, rather than biological, construct indicating the beliefs our society places on the male-taller norm.

Our sample of college-attending women wanted tall men for a variety of reasons, but some of those reasons tend to indicate preference for traditional gender expectations. As such, it was notable that about 10% of the women wanted a taller date so that they would feel comfortable wearing high heel shoes. Such shoes are clearly a measure of meeting gender norms as only women are expected to wear such shoes. Images of men as strong protectors that women can look up to even in their heels clearly comport with traditional Western gender images. High heels are not used as a height equalizer with men, but as a social marker of feminine attractiveness. Given this social expectation, the young women in our sample often noted the need to find a man taller than them even when wearing high heels. It was clear in the minds of many female respondents that the height of a man helped her to engage in her traditional gender role. In fact a small percentage of women overtly stated that being with a taller man made them feel more feminine. "I hate to rule it out, but I feel as if dating a much shorter man would make me feel large and unfeminine" (5 feet 7 inches White woman). Thus, many of the reasons women provided for desiring a taller mate can be tied to a desire to adhere to traditional gender roles. They also gave reasons consistent with evolutionary biology, such as expressing that taller men made them feel more secure and protected, both common responses.

Among the young men in our sample, different reasons were given for why they would not date a woman below a certain height. On the question of why they had a lower limit in who they would date, men were more likely than women to discuss the physical difficulties of having a shorter than desired partner ($r = .182$; $p < .01$). Men perceived physical difficulties in dating women who were overly short:

Anything shorter than that would just be physically awkward when it came to any kind of physical intimacy. (6 feet 1 inches White man)

I like it when the body of your partner fits yours, and it also makes it easier to kiss, hold hands, and do other activities with your partner. (5 feet 11 inches Hispanic man)

Rather than attempting to conform to traditional expectations, men who had a lower height limit had such limits for practical physical reasons. However, this was not the case for why they limited how tall their dates could be. On the question of why they had an upper limit in who they would date, men were more likely than women to discuss negative societal expectations of having a taller partner ($r = .186$; $p < .01$):

I feel naturally men should be taller, at least that is how I was brought up with popular culture, and it would just feel weird if a woman I was dating was "so" much taller than I was. (5 feet 8 inches White man)

It looks socially awkward for a male to be shorter than a female in a relationship. (5 feet 11 inches Black man)

Males who set upper limits are not considering physical or sexual difficulties but societal expectations. Although they did not discuss traditional gender roles, they did indicate a desire to escape possible stigma. This stigma likely arises in images of a taller women that would not fit into the traditional societal gender role of the male being the larger, stronger individual. In this sense, they were reinforcing societal expectations with their higher height limit just as women reinforced those expectations with their lower height limit.

On the other hand, women who had a higher height limit mentioned physical difficulties as a possible problem. On the question of why they had an upper limit in who they would date, women were more likely than men to discuss the physical difficulties of having a taller partner ($r = .187$; $p < .01$). In many ways their answers mirrored the desire of some men who possessed lower height limits. This provides possible insight into the dynamics of height for taller men and shorter women who are, respectively, concerned with shorter and higher height limits. Their concerns are not linked to societal expectations. A taller man does not tend to worry about dating women taller than him since so few women are as tall as him. A shorter woman does not tend to be concerned dating men shorter than her for the same reason. So in neither case do tall men and short women tend to enunciate concern about social expectations. Their concerns about short women and tall men are practical, about possible physical difficulties. It is possible that such individuals have concerns about societal norms but simply do not enunciate them because of either the reality that their stature makes them more likely to fit into those norms or potential physical difficulties with tall men or short women is a more pressing concern for them. Although it is possible that social concerns play a role in the height decisions of short women and tall men, those concerns are not as important to them as it is for short men and tall women.

The height differences between the sexes in important beyond the practical concerns of taller men and shorter women. Protection concerns are more important to shorter women than taller women. Height was negatively correlated among women with the desire to talk about protection or security when asked about why height was important ($r = -.25$; $p < .01$). Some of the shorter women expressed their concern:

I want someone who is somewhat significantly taller than me so I feel protected. (4 feet 11 inches White woman)

My basic rule is that I am shorter than him. I just want to feel like we look good together, that we appear made for each other. There is a certain security found in being and feeling shorter. Almost as though he is a protector of sorts. (5 feet 3 inches White woman)

I think it goes back to my “animal instincts”. I need my partner to be taller than me so that I feel like I’m protected. (5 feet 3 inches Hispanic woman)

The greater emphasis that shorter woman place on protection may be because a tall woman can automatically assume that men her height or taller are adequate protectors, or that being taller, she is less in need of protection. A short woman may feel more vulnerable, because of her small physical stature, and thus need to make sure that her date is sufficiently taller than her so that she can feel protected. Regardless of the reason, shorter women looked to height as a measure of protection—a clear traditional gender expectation for men. Taller women also had their gender expectation, but it was focused less on protection and more on having a tall partner so that they could wear high heel shoes:

My entire family is tall. I love wearing heels when the occasion rises. I want someone to feel comfortable walking next to me. (5 feet 10 inches White woman)

I don’t want to look down to a man. I don’t mind looking eye to eye with him though. If I wear heels, then I feel like awkward and very tall and I don’t like that. (5 feet 8 inches White woman)

Taller women exhibited a desire to wear high heels and yet still have a man who was taller than them. Height was positively, although not significantly, correlated with the discussing high heels in the question on why height was important to women ($r = .13$; $p = ns$). This is a concern for taller women, but not for shorter women. Shorter women may not fear that they cannot wear high heels since most men are taller than them even when wearing heels. Heels can be the way patriarchy plays itself out with taller women as previous scholars have argued that heels are a way in which feminine helplessness is perpetrated at the expense of the health of women (Bartlett, 1994; Jeffreys, 2005).

The height of a woman helps to influence why a taller man is more desirable to her. Yet even with these differences, both short and tall women look for tall men to meet traditional gender roles. Clearly a female’s relative height

produces different challenges that having a tall partner can address. The ways tradition roles are reinforced are contextualized according to the particular situation a woman finds herself in relative to her own height. But the power of societal gender roles still play themselves out regardless of the height of the female.

Height is more important to women than to men, and for different reasons. This finding is in keeping with previous research concerning sex and importance of height preference (Pierce, 1996; Salska et al., 2008). If adherence to traditional gender expectations is the major factor for height preference then we may have a clue to the contrasting levels of importance of those preferences between men and women. Traditional gender expectations are that women seek out higher status males. In a patriarchal society where they operate at a disadvantage, females may have more invested in locating a higher status partner than men. Height may play a significant role in establishing the perception of higher status among males and thus is more important to women than to men.

For short and tall men, there was not much difference in their answers. Plain and simple, for the males who noted that height mattered, the woman should be shorter, but not so short as to cause possible physical intimacy issues. Not only does height matter less for men than for women but also the contextualization that occurs between tall and short woman is missing for men.

Discussion

It is common knowledge that tall height is a relational asset for men and a relational liability for women. On the surface, this propensity does not portray a gender advantage for either men or women as both short men and tall women suffer from it. However, the reasons why this preference exists do reveal gender propensities that support patriarchy. Female preference for taller men is connected to masculine images of dominance and protector. This preference is also encouraged by the desire of women to wear high heels, a practice that is known to physically damage women. It is a biological reality that men are on average taller than women. It is a social construction that this difference is used to help maintain societal imagery of male dominance and female helplessness.

It is possible that at one time height conferred real biological advantages that justified superior male status in society. Such height, and the physical power that emerges from it, may have been important in preindustrial communities for protection and the procurement of material resources. Biological explanations for height preference suggest that females prefer taller men

because of the evolutionary advantages their height provides for them. However, in contemporary society, technology has neutralized such advantages and there does not seem to be an obvious advantage of height as it concerns protection or the obtaining of resources. There are indirect advantages as studies have shown that taller individuals are more financially successful (Judge & Cable, 2004; Kortt & Leigh, 2010). Nevertheless it is possible that female preference for height is a holdover to earlier biological needs. However, few individuals in our study discussed a desire to pass on genes for taller children. If biological preference is a factor then it is not one that the vast majority of respondents are consciously aware of.

The nature of the qualitative data in this article makes it impossible to make definitive generalizations from those results. Nevertheless that qualitative data provide clues as to whether a “good genes/evolutionary biology/psychology” or a “gender role/stereotype” explanation is a better way to conceptualize height desires. Most of the explanations of our respondents were connected to societal expectations or gender stereotypes. There were relatively few assertions of the genetic or economic value of height and even the one major biological advantage discussed, the masculine ability to offer physical protection, is clearly connected to the gender stereotype of men as protectors. Gender stereotypes seem to offer a more comprehensive explanation of the findings of these results than notions of good genes and biological/economic advantages.

However, it may be difficult for individuals to offer evolutionary explanations and thus they revert to social justifications. In other words, college students may envision economic and biological advantages in their height preferences but do not know how to enunciate such preferences in a socially acceptable manner. Our findings provide insight into initial responses individuals give when asked about their dating height preferences, but we recognize the need for further work with more sophisticated methods to tease out a more sophisticated explanation of height preferences. Our initial findings suggest gender-based legitimization of height preferences to be more central than evolutionary-based legitimization of height preferences, but future work may discover a more nuanced interpretation of these data whereby evolutionary concerns are more prevalent than what we have found with this research.

Furthermore, given the limited range of our sample (mostly college-attending individuals younger than 30 years in a given region of the country) we may be documenting a localized effect connected to individuals in a certain subculture. Future research can use the concepts found in this research to craft quantitative data to systematically test the power of gender expectations in our height romantic expectations. Additionally, given the concerns in the last paragraph, the addition of a gender role scale in future research may help

determine who tends to provide gender role-based answers and how certain gender expectations are correlated with height preferences.

An important piece of the puzzle can be seen in the comments of those who discussed wanting to meet societal expectations. Such individuals were not always able to articulate a clear reason why they possess their given height preference but they somehow understood what was expected of them from the larger society. It is possible that these societal expectations have developed from the knowledge of biological advantages of taller men from earlier times but we contend that a more plausible explanation is that these preferences arose out of the patriarchal nature of our society. The overt need for taller, stronger men has disappeared as technology has become more sophisticated in our society. But we still see evidence of societal preference for dominant men in several social institutions. For example, even in modern society men are generally expected to be the aggressors when it comes to initiating romantic relationships (Clark, Shaver, & Abrahams, 1999; Hall & Canterberry, 2011; Pryor & Merluzzi, 1985). In a society that encourages men to be dominant and women to be submissive, having the image of tall men hovering over short women reinforces this value.

This assertion suggests a powerful reason why patriarchy persists in a society that overtly discusses striving for equality between the sexes. Beliefs supporting patriarchy are embedded into what may seem the most mundane of practices and preferences. We did not ask about the political preference of our respondents but if even feminist females still look for taller men, they may, unintentionally, reinforce the ideal of dominant male-submissive female. Future research would do well to investigate whether political ideology is connected to certain explanations of height preference among heterosexuals. If our society is going to obtain a pure level of equality, it may be important to consider how mundane preferences, such as height in our romantic relationships, still operate to create beliefs that challenge that equality.

Of course, height is not the only physical romantic preference individuals possess. Romantic preferences for weight, eye color, hair color, build, and even race may provide insight into our societal beliefs. Future research should replicate this, or find a more effective, methodology to investigate the possible gender lessons that can be learned from these preferences. Furthermore, in addition to political ideology, there may be other nonmaterial cultural determinants of physical romantic preferences. For example, a nontrivial number of women mentioned desiring a taller man in order to indicate a desire for the man to have the power in their relationships. It is possible that religious women are more likely to have this desire than their secular counterparts. Teachings about male headship may manifest itself in seeking out a man a religious woman can “look up to.” This looking up may

have a physical as well as a social power dimension. Future research that seeks to link romantic preferences to religious desires may prove to be fruitful in discovering the beliefs and desires behind these preferences.

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Notes

1. The number of respondents indicates the actual number of respondents and not the number of respondents indicated after the data were weighed.
2. Although we will report on the race of the respondent, there were not any noticeable racial effects in these data. For example, we compared White respondents with non-White respondents with the 10 themes documented in this research, but found that they were not significantly different from each other in any of the themes. The most disparate finding was in the Look Down/Up theme but even here we found $p = .192$. The average p score with all nine themes was .749 indicating that Whites and non-Whites enunciated the basic themes of these results in a fairly similar manner.

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