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Nicki Hames

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Stable Standards or Fluctuating Fancies? Stability and Change in People's Mate Criteria Over 28 Months

Nicki Hames
Faculty Advisor: Dr. Carrie Bredow

Hope College

BACKGROUND RESEARCH

Theoretical Perspectives:

- There is an underlying assumption in both evolutionary theory and Fletcher's Ideal Standards Model that people's standards for a long-term partner are stable over time.

- In contrast, social-exchange theory suggests that mate standards should actually adapt over time as people's experiences change.

Empirical Evidence:

- The empirical evidence on mate selection is also mixed on the extent to which people's standards are stable.

- The majority of previous research on mate criteria has assessed mate standards at one point in time, with the *assumption* that these standards are stable over time and, thus, should predict future behavior.

- Although a few studies have found that people's mate standards are relatively stable over a period of weeks and even a couple of months, many of these same studies suggest that there may be interindividual differences in stability.

THE PRESENT STUDY

- In order to address the limitations of past research, we conducted a longitudinal study over four time points (approximately 28 months), which employed a more diverse sample compared to previous studies and utilized more sophisticated statistical techniques.

- The current study explored age and gender in order to determine the extent to which these factors potentially moderated the rank-order, mean-level, and individual-level stability of people's mate criteria over a 28-month period.

HYPOTHESES

- Mate standards will remain generally stable over time.
- Older people will report more stable standards than younger people.
- There will be no gender differences in the stability of mate standards.

PARTICIPANTS

- 285 originally unmarried, heterosexual adults who participated at all four time points
- 205 women, 79 men, M age = 30.52 (SD = 10.82, Range = 18-66)
- 73.9% White, 80.7% never married

PROCEDURE

- Participants completed an initial online survey and three follow-up surveys at 9- to 10-month intervals.

MEASURES

- Participants' mate standards were assessed using 18 characteristics taken from past research examining what qualities people desire in a long term romantic partner.

- Using factor analysis, these standards loaded onto three distinct dimensions: *attractiveness/vitality*, *status/ resources*, and *warmth/trustworthiness*.

- **Rank-order stability** reflects people's maintenance of their individual position compared to other participants in the sample, which was analyzed using correlations.

- **Mean-level stability** looked at consistency in the absolute stringency of a person's ratings for a particular dimension of mate standards, which was examined with t-tests.

- **Individual-level stability** examined the rate of change in standards over time by way of multilevel modeling (MLM).

RANK-ORDER

- Mate standards were strongly correlated across the four time points.

- This means that people's mate criteria remained generally stable over the 28-month period.

RANK-ORDER CORRELATIONS

	T1/T2	T1/T3	T1/T4	T2/T3	T2/T4	T3/T4
Physical Attractiveness/Vitality	.65***	.66***	.55***	.70***	.68***	.64***
Status/ Resources	.72***	.71***	.63***	.73***	.70***	.71***
Warmth/ Trustworthiness	.55***	.55***	.51***	.62***	.54***	.64***
Overall Mate Standards	.66***	.67***	.58***	.70***	.68***	.69***

*** p < .001

MEAN-LEVEL

- T-tests revealed significant mean-level increases from T1 to T2 on all standard dimensions.
- No mean-level differences were detected from T2-T4.

MEAN-LEVEL T-TESTS

	T1/T2	T1/T3	T1/T4	T2/T3	T2/T4	T3/T4	T1 M	T2 M	T3 M	T4 M
Physical Attractiveness/Vitality	-5.13***	-3.51**	-4.57***	1.59	-0.28	-1.86+	6.68	6.95	6.83	6.88
Status/ Resources	-3.80***	-3.68***	-4.95***	0.53	-1.07	-0.96	7.22	7.45	7.36	7.43
Warmth/ Trustworthiness	-5.84***	-6.49***	-6.86***	0.72	0.02	-0.96	8.09	8.42	8.37	8.40
Overall Mate Standards	-5.86***	-5.74***	-6.63***	1.06	-0.52	-1.45	7.43	7.71	7.62	7.67

*** p < .001, ** p < .01, + p < .10

INDIVIDUAL-LEVEL

- Individual growth curve modeling showed that, on average, participants' standards followed a positive linear trajectory, but that there was significant variability in this pattern.

MODERATORS

- As hypothesized, individuals who were older reported more stable standards than younger people over the course of the study with respect to rank-order and mean-level stability.

- Age, however, did not have an effect on individual-level stability (i.e., the linear rate of change in standards over time was not significantly lower for older participants).

- In regards to rank-order stability, older participants reported more stable standards on the dimension of status/resources compared to younger people.

- For mean-level stability, older individuals reported more consistent mate standards for warmth/trustworthiness, compared to the other standard dimensions.

- No consistent gender differences in stability were found across any of the standard dimensions.

RANK-ORDER MODERATION REGRESSIONS

	T1/T2	T1/T3	T1/T4	T2/T3	T2/T4	T3/T4
Physical Attractiveness/Vitality	.25	-.16	.18	.01	.32	.49
Status/ Resources	.66**	.27	.42+	-.01	.28	.57*
Warmth/ Trustworthiness	.56	.64	.69	.17	.40	1.00+
Overall Mate Standards	.53	-.02	.35	-.13	.49	1.07**

** p < .01, * p < .05, + p < .10

MEAN-LEVEL MODERATION CORRELATIONS

	T1/T2	T1/T3	T1/T4	T2/T3	T2/T4	T3/T4
Physical Attractiveness/Vitality	-.19**	-.05	-.05	-.13*	-.10+	-.13*
Status/ Resources	-.03	-.06	-.01	-.07	-.06	-.05
Warmth/ Trustworthiness	-.12*	-.16**	-.16**	-.12*	-.09	-.20**
Overall Mate Standards	-.09	-.10+	-.07	-.11+	-.14*	-.17**

** p < .01, * p < .05, + p < .10

IMPLICATIONS & CONCLUSION

- Extending short-term evidence for the stability of people's criteria, mate standards were found to be generally stable over the course of the study. However, we also found that there was an unexpected increase in standards from T1 to T2, suggesting that there may have been something about participating in a study on romantic partnering that caused this initial jump in standards.

- We also see that there is significant individual variability in the extent to which standards were stable. Interestingly, age was found to moderate rank-order and mean-level stability, but not individual-level stability. Nevertheless, our MLM analyses revealed significant variability around the average linear slope, suggesting that there are other factors not tested here (e.g., race, psychological investment in marrying, etc.) that are accounting for this variability.

- Taken together, results show that despite an overall pattern of stability, change did occur, particularly for people who were younger.

- Given that more stable mate standards are likely to be better predictors of people's later mate choices or relationship evaluations, this work suggests that the reported mate standards of older individuals may be more likely to "matter" when it comes to predicting their future behavior.