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Attractiveness and Height: The Role of Stature in Dating Preference, Frequency of Dating, and Perceptions of Attractiveness

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The relationship between height and attractiveness was investigated using self-reports of dating behavior and subjects' ratings of photographs depicting males and females of different heights. Shorter females were preferred more as dates, were dated more frequently, and were rated as more attractive than taller females regardless of the height of the male subjects. For males, the relationship between height and attractiveness was less clear. Females expressed a general preference for dating males taller than themselves and reported dating taller males more frequently but did not rate their tall male dates as more attractive. Moreover, no relationship was found between the height of the male subjects and their self-reported dating frequency. Interestingly, females did rate a photographed male as more attractive when he was depicted as tall than when he was depicted as short relative to an adjacent female.

In his 1977 song entitled "Short People," Randy Newman exclaims that short people, being imbued with numerous undesirable characteristics, have little necessity for continued existence. Newman's song is a sarcastic, metaphorical attack on prejudice; yet, evidence documents an underlying prejudice regarding height that favors taller males. For example, Feldman (1975) found that taller males (6'2" and over) are more likely to be hired and are likely to have higher starting salaries than shorter males (under 6'0"). Other research has revealed that taller males are preferred by sales recruiters (Kurtz, 1969), are more often selected as leaders (Stogdill, 1948), and are more likely to be selected to advance in corporate management training programs (Farb, 1978). Finally, strong evidence points to a height bias among the electorate such that voters prefer taller political candidates to shorter ones (Feldman, 1975; Gillis, 1982; Kassarijian, 1963; Ward, 1967).

This "taller is better" prejudice appears to extend to children as well. For example, first-graders tend to allocate greater rewards to larger than to smaller children

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(Graziano, 1978; Graziano, Musser, Rosen, & Shaffer, 1982). In addition, mothers tend to rate tall boys 1 to 2 years old as more competent than average-sized and small boys, even after the effect of perceptions of the children's ages was removed (Eisenberg, Roth, Bryniarski, & Murray, 1984).

A similar height bias appears in the attraction literature, where tall males appear to be preferred overwhelmingly by females. Indeed, Berscheid and Walster (1974) have stated as a cardinal principle of date selection that the man must be taller than his partner. Consistent with this principle, several researchers have shown that females tend to marry males taller than themselves above and beyond the frequency that would be predicted by chance (Beigel, 1954; Gillis & Avis, 1980). Likewise, investigations of "lonely hearts" advertisements have revealed that, among women making height requests, 80% wanted a male 6' or taller and virtually 100% wanted a male at least 4" taller than themselves (Cameron, Oskamp, & Sparks, 1978). Finally, tall males advertising in "lonely hearts" columns receive significantly more responses than short males do (Lynn & Shurgot, 1984).

The evidence above suggests that, in the realm of romance, tall males are favored. However, one study provided evidence for a curvilinear relationship between height and attractiveness (Graziano, Brothen, & Berscheid, 1978). In this study, females rated the attractiveness and desirability as a date of several males presented in composite photographs. Attached to each photograph was a list of demographic characteristics, including information about height. Trend analyses revealed that tall males were rated as more attractive and as more desirable as dates than short males. However, a significant curvilinear relationship also emerged. Males of medium height (5'9"-5'11") were rated as more attractive and as more desirable as a date than males described as short (5'5"-5'7") or tall (6'2"-6'4"). Moreover, this curvilinear relationship held regardless of the height (range 4'10"-6'1") of the female rater.

The curvilinear effect found by Graziano et al. (1978) merits further investigation. A compelling question is whether this effect generalizes to other arenas of interpersonal behavior. The present study sought to address this question by investigating the extent to which height influences an individual's self-reported dating behavior and perceptions of the dating partner's attractiveness. By acquiring information on the height, frequency of dating, and attractiveness rating of the dates an individual has had in the recent past, we hoped to obtain a more detailed picture of the relationship between height and attractiveness. In addition, a comparison of the respondents' height with the height of dates they have had in the recent past would permit an examination of the cardinal rule of dating (i.e., whether males predominantly date females shorter than themselves and females predominantly date males taller than themselves).

Still another strategy for studying the relationship between attractiveness and height would be through the use of photographic evidence from which raters must infer height themselves. Such an approach would represent an extension of the Graziano et al. study, in which judgments of height were based on written information.

The present study also afforded the opportunity to investigate an often overlooked aspect of the relationship between height and attractiveness — namely, the relationship

between a female's height and her attractiveness to a male. The few studies that have investigated this relationship have yielded inconsistent findings. For example, Lynn and Shurgot (1984) found that the number of responses received by female advertisers in "lonely hearts" columns did not vary as a function of their height. Likewise, Lerner and Moore (1974) found no relationship between the height estimates of a female target and ratings of her physical attractiveness. In contrast to these two studies, Cameron et al. (1978) found that men making height requests in "lonely hearts" advertisements requested a female of small or medium stature (relative to other females), regardless of their own height. Given these discrepant findings, the present study was designed to investigate the height-attractiveness relationship among women as well as men.

METHOD

Subjects

Subjects were 60 female and 50 male students (all unmarried) in lower-level psychology courses at the University of Missouri and Ohio State University. Data from 1 male subject were excluded because of his failure to follow instructions.

Instrument and Procedure

All subjects completed a questionnaire booklet comprising (a) numerous demographic items, including several questions related to dating behavior, height, and attractiveness, and (b) a photograph of a male and female and several questions about the photograph.¹

Date preference and dating frequency. Subjects responded to a forced-choice item in which they indicated whether they preferred to date a person shorter than themselves, taller than themselves, or of the same height as themselves. In addition, subjects were asked to indicate the number of dates they had had in the last month.

Self-report of dating and height. Subjects were asked to provide information about each person dated in the last month, including height, frequency of dates, and rating of the date's attractiveness. Ratings of attractiveness were made on a 9-point Likert scale with endpoints labeled *very unattractive* (1) and *very attractive* (9). No instructions were given about the order in which subjects should list their dates (e.g., most frequent to least frequent, most recent to least recent).

Rating of photographs. Subjects received one of three 4" × 6" black-and-white photographs depicting a male and female engaged in conversation. In each photograph the male and female were standing approximately 18" apart, facing each other, and making eye contact. The same male and female were pictured in each photograph. In one of the photographs, the male was pictured as approximately 5" taller than the female; in the second, the male was pictured as the same height as the female; and in the third, the male was pictured as approximately 5" shorter than the female. On the same page as the photograph were five questions, four of which were distractors and one of which asked subjects to rate the attractiveness of the opposite-sex individual

in the photograph. The ratings were made on a 9-point Likert scale with endpoints labeled very unattractive (1) and very attractive (9).

RESULTS

Demographics. The height of male subjects ($M = 70.31''$; range = 60-75") was slightly negatively skewed, with a few more males appearing at the tall end of the continuum than at the short end. The height of female subjects ($M = 64.95''$; range = 57-72") was normally distributed. Finally, the heights of the male dates listed by female subjects ($M = 71.14''$; range = 65-77") and the female dates listed by male subjects ($M = 65.62''$; range = 55-70") were both normally distributed.

Date preferences. The item asking subjects whom they preferred to date revealed that preferences were significantly related to height, $\chi^2(2) = 95.70, p < .0001$. Among female subjects, 57 (95%) preferred dating males taller than themselves, 2 (3%) preferred dating males of the same height, and 1 (2%) preferred dating shorter males. Among male subjects, 39 (80%) preferred dating females shorter than themselves, 7 (14%) preferred dating females the same height as themselves, and none preferred dating females taller than themselves (data for this question were unavailable for 6% of the male subjects).

Height of subject and dating frequency. In addition to being asked the preferred height of their dates, subjects were asked about their dating behavior over the last month. Polynomial regression analyses testing for linear and curvilinear trends were conducted separately for males and females to determine whether the subject's own height predicted the frequency of dating. In this procedure the predictor variable (i.e., height) is first entered into the regression equation to test for the linear effect. The square of the predictor variable is then added to the regression equation to test for the curvilinear effect. This procedure provides a test of the curvilinear effect with the variance attributable to the linear effect removed.

To compensate for problems (i.e., biased, unreliable estimators) associated with multicollinearity inherent in polynomial regression analyses, Neter, Wasserman, and Kutner (1983) recommend substituting for the predictor variable the *deviations* of the predictor variable. Consequently, deviation scores for male subjects were derived by subtracting their heights from the average height for male subjects ($M = 70.31''$), and the deviation scores for female subjects were derived by subtracting their heights from the average height for female subjects ($M = 64.95''$). The deviation scores and the squared deviation scores for males were then entered into a regression model as independent variables for the purpose of predicting the mean number of dates for male subjects. An identical procedure was used for female subjects to predict their mean number of dates.

Trend analyses for male subjects revealed no evidence for either a linear or a curvilinear relationship between height and reported dating frequency ($ts < 1$). Thus, the height of a male subject was unrelated to the number of dates he reported having. Trend analyses for female subjects revealed a significant linear effect, $t(1, 56) = 2.62, p < .011$, but no evidence for a curvilinear effect, $t(1, 56) = 1.32, n.s.$ The regression

coefficient ($\beta = -.939$) associated with the linear effect indicates that shorter females reported having more dates than taller females.

Height of date and dating frequency. Analyses were also conducted to determine the relationship between height and dating frequency for those individuals whom subjects reported dating in the recent past. Subjects were asked to list the height and number of dates for every person they had dated in the previous month. Polynomial regression analyses testing for linear and curvilinear trends were again conducted separately for male and female subjects to determine whether the height of the person dated was related to the frequency with which he or she was dated. Although subjects listed as many as five different persons they had dated in the past month, it was decided prior to the data analyses to consider only the data from the first person the subject listed in order to guard against any biases arising from an overrepresentation of responses from subjects with multiple dating partners. This procedure excluded from the analyses only 15% of the dates that had occurred.

Again, to compensate for problems associated with multicollinearity, deviation scores were substituted for the raw scores of the date's height. That is, for male subjects, the height of the first female date listed was subtracted from the mean height of all female dates listed first ($M = 65.62''$), and for female subjects, the height of the first date the females listed was subtracted from the mean height of all male dates listed first ($M = 71.14''$). The polynomial terms were derived by squaring these deviations.

Separate polynomial regression analyses were conducted for each sex. For males, the first analyses investigated the relationship between the height of the females dated and the frequency with which they were dated by male subjects. Because 7 males indicated that they had not dated anyone in the last month, data from only 42 of the 49 males (86%) were included. Analyses revealed a significant linear trend, $t(1, 39) = 2.44, p < .019$, but no curvilinear trend, $t(1, 39) = 1.01, n.s.$ The negative regression coefficient ($\beta = -.862$) associated with the linear trend indicates that male subjects reported dating short females more frequently than tall females. Although 50 of the 60 female subjects (83%) reported having had at least one date during the preceding month, usable data were available for only 48 females. Repeating the analysis above for these 48 females revealed a significant linear trend, $t(1, 45) = 2.49, p < .017$. Female subjects reported dating tall males more frequently than short males ($\beta = 1.023$). In addition, a marginally significant curvilinear trend emerged, $t(1, 45) = 1.96, p < .057, \beta = .231$. A clear presentation of this curvilinear relationship requires that estimated scores of the dependent variable (dating frequency) be computed from the unstandardized beta weights (both the linear and curvilinear) for the predictor variable (Cohen & Cohen, 1975, pp. 312-313). In the present study, the estimated dating frequency of the male dates was computed for the mean height and for points one standard deviation ($SD = 2.80$) above and below the mean height (see Figure 1). As indicated by the plot of the upper regression line in Figure 1, female subjects reported dating tall males more frequently than males of short or medium stature.

It is possible that relative height (how tall the date is in comparison with the subject) is a more important determinant of the attraction-height relationship than

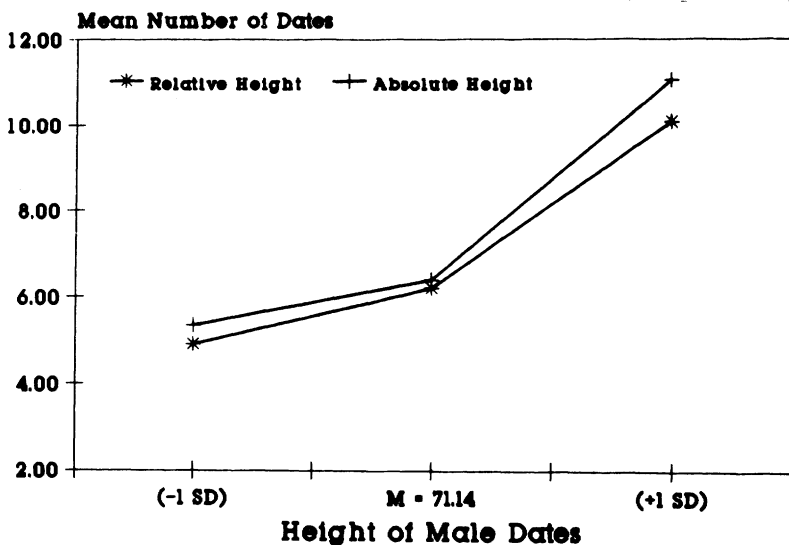


Figure 1 Mean number of dates reported by female subjects as a function of date's height (regression lines computed for points 1 SD above and below the mean height of the male dates). Relative height is the height of the male relative to the female respondent; absolute height is simply the height of the male.

absolute height (how tall the date is independent of the subject). Consequently, the analyses above were repeated using the date's relative height as the predictor of the number of dates. The relative height data were generated by subtracting the height of the date from the subject's height. The distribution of the data revealed that only 1 male reported that his date was taller than himself and only 4 reported their dates to be of the same height. The remaining 37 reported their dates to be shorter than themselves. Among females, none reported their dates to be shorter than themselves, and only 3 reported their dates to be of the same height. The remaining 47 females reported their dates to be taller than themselves. These findings are consistent with those for dating preference and provide some support for the "cardinal rule of dating."

The analyses for males revealed that neither the linear trend, $t(1, 39) = 1.59$, n.s., nor the curvilinear trend, $t(1, 39) < 1$, was significant. Thus the relative height of a female date appeared to be unrelated to the frequency with which she was dated by a male subject. By contrast, for female subjects a significant linear trend emerged, $t(1, 47) = 3.27$, $p < .002$. The value for the regression coefficient ($\beta = -.912$) indicates that males were dated more frequently the taller they were relative to the female subjects. However, the significant linear trend was qualified by a significant curvilinear trend, $t(1, 47) = 3.02$, $p < .004$ ($\beta = .160$). Again, the estimated dating frequency

for the mean height of the male dates and for points plus and minus one standard deviation from this mean was computed. Consistent with the analysis of absolute height, males were dated more frequently when they were considerably taller than the female subject than when their height equaled or only moderately exceeded hers (see lower plot in Figure 1).

Height of date and ratings of attractiveness. Analyses were conducted to investigate the relationship between the absolute height of a date and the subject's rating of that date's attractiveness. A polynomial regression analysis of the data from male subjects revealed a significant linear trend, $t(1, 39) = 2.45, p < .019$, but no curvilinear trend, $t(1, 39) = 1.45$, n.s. Consistent with the findings for the frequency of dating, male subjects rated their short female dates as more attractive than their tall female dates ($\beta = -.178$). When this analysis was repeated for female subjects, neither the linear trend, $t(1, 45) < 1$, nor the curvilinear trend, $t(1, 45) = 1.63$, n.s., emerged as significant. Apparently, for female subjects, the reported height and attractiveness of the males dated were unrelated.

These analyses were repeated using relative height in place of absolute height as a predictor of attractiveness. Neither the linear nor the curvilinear trend was significant for males or for females. Thus, the height of the individual dated relative to the subject appears to be unrelated to ratings of attractiveness for either males or females.

Photograph ratings. Because male and female subjects rated different stimuli (males rated the female while females rated the male in the photograph), separate one-way ANOVAs were conducted for each sex to investigate the height and attractiveness relationship. The responses of female subjects to the item asking how attractive they found the male in the photograph revealed a significant height effect, $F(2, 57) = 11.47, p < .0001$, effect size $r = .30$. When the male in the photograph was taller than the female, he was rated as more attractive ($M = 6.00$) than when he was the same height as ($M = 5.00$) or shorter than ($M = 4.10$) the female (all M s differed at $p < .05$, using Duncan's New Multiple Range Test). By contrast, the responses of male subjects revealed that the height of the pictured female did not affect ratings of attractiveness, $F(2, 47) = 1.74$, n.s. (M s = 4.72, 3.98, and 4.65 for short, same-height, and tall females respectively; see Figure 2).

DISCUSSION

In reporting their general dating preference, males expressed a clear preference for dating females shorter than themselves, while females overwhelmingly expressed a preference for dating males taller than themselves. These findings suggest a height bias in dating preferences. Admittedly, however, actual dates are not always a matter of preference, and the preferences subjects reported may not correspond to their actual dating behavior. People cannot always date whomever they desire as frequently as they desire. This is particularly true for females, whose dating behavior is constrained by social norms regarding who initiates dating relationships. A more incisive picture of the height-attraction relationship can be gained from subjects' self-reported dating behavior and from the experimental evidence provided by the photograph ratings.

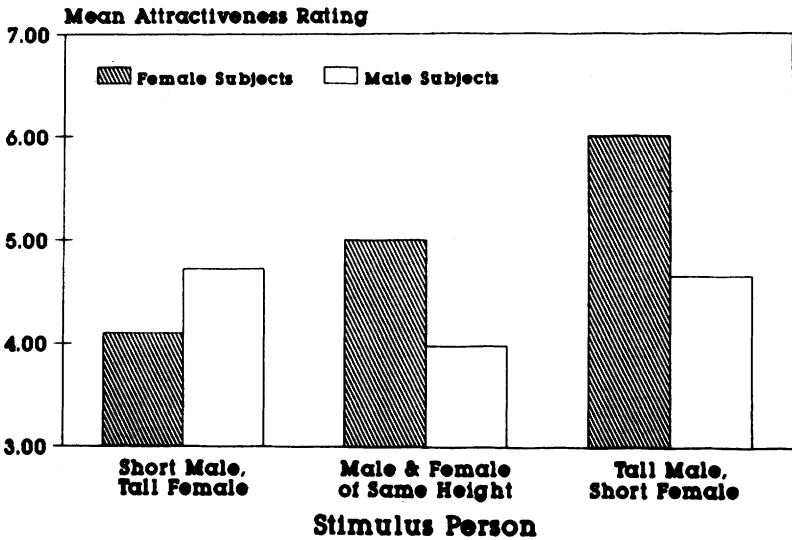


Figure 2 Attractiveness ratings of photographed males (rated by female subjects) and females (rated by male subjects) as a function of height. Higher numbers indicate ratings of greater attractiveness.

Height and Attractiveness in Females

The self-reports from both male and female subjects showed that short females dated more frequently than tall females. In addition, short female dates were rated as more attractive by male subjects. Interestingly, when the height of a female date was considered relative to the height of the male respondent, both the relationship between height and attractiveness and the relationship between height and self-reported dating frequency disappeared. Moreover, the photograph data revealed no relationship between the height and attractiveness of the pictured female. These findings suggest that how short or tall a female is relative to a male may have little bearing on the extent to which she is perceived as attractive or the frequency with which she is reported to date. Instead, females who are short in an absolute sense are rated as more attractive and are dated more frequently than tall females. Stated another way, the present findings appear to be consistent with those of Cameron et al. (1978), suggesting that males, regardless of their own height, date short females more frequently and perceive short females as more attractive than tall females.

Height and Attractiveness in Males

Similar to previous research, the present study presents a complex picture of the height-attractiveness relationship among men. No relationship was found between

the absolute height of a male and the number of dates *he* reported having during the previous month. However, in the self-reports of *females*, tall males were dated more frequently than short males regardless of whether height was considered in an absolute sense or considered relative to the height of the female respondent. More important, this linear trend was qualified by a significant curvilinear trend: Tall males were dated considerably more frequently than short and medium-height males.

Clearly there is an inconsistency between the self-reports of males and the self-reports of females. Whereas females reported dating tall males more frequently than short or medium-height males, short and medium-height males reported dating just as frequently as tall males. Whose self-reports do we trust? It is possible that the discrepancy results from differences in what the male and female data represent. The male reports represent all dates within the preceding month; the female reports represent dates with only one person (the person listed first) during the preceding month. Yet, the first dating partner listed accounted for 85% of all dates reported. The implication is that the data represented by the two reports are roughly equivalent.

A more intriguing explanation for the discrepant findings stems from subjects' judgments of height. Previous research has demonstrated that judgments of height of a stimulus person are influenced by the ascribed status of that person. As the ascribed status of a stimulus person increases, estimates of height also increase, with high-status persons being perceived as taller than low-status persons (Dannenmaier & Thumin, 1964; Wilson, 1968).

It is possible that a similar perceptual distortion occurs when females make judgments regarding the height of a male dating partner. Typically, females date males older than themselves. Since age is related to status, this age difference may explain why females perceive their dates as taller. Likewise, dating frequency may distort perceptions of height. Often, as the number of dates a female has with a particular male increases, the status of that male also increases. Consequently, males who are dated frequently by a female enjoy higher status in her eyes. This higher status, in turn, may augment perceptions of their height.

If the judgments of height made by females are distorted, might the height judgments made by males also be distorted? That is, males, like females, may perceive the females they date frequently to be taller than the females they date infrequently. Although such a distortion is possible, we know of no previous research that finds perceived height and status to be related in females, nor do the present data appear to support such a conclusion. Perhaps, because males typically date females younger than themselves, they are less likely to ascribe additional status to these females based on their age and, consequently, less likely to distort their height perceptions.

Of interest, although females reported dating tall males more frequently than short and medium-height males, they did not rate their tall male dates as more attractive. Indeed, the correlation between the attractiveness ratings supplied by female subjects for their male dates and the frequency with which they dated these males was surprisingly low ($r = .28$).² It is possible that this inconsistency arises because social norms regarding who initiates dating relationships allow females less control over whom and how often they date. Thus, while females may (a) prefer to date tall males,

(b) date tall males more frequently, and (c) even find tall males in general to be more attractive, they nevertheless may not view the tall males whom *they* date to be any more attractive than short or medium-height males. Alternatively, although females may view tall males as more attractive in the abstract (when not referring to any particular person and when judging a photo), when they evaluate a real date, other aspects of the male (e.g., personality, wit, intelligence) may become preeminent, diminishing the impact of height on perceived attractiveness.

Conclusions

Previous research studying the relationship between height and attractiveness has focused primarily on the ratings of attractiveness by female subjects of male targets of various heights. The present study took a unique approach, collecting data bearing on the height-attractiveness relationship of both male and female targets. In addition, the present investigation approached the height-attractiveness question from a novel perspective by eliciting information regarding subjects' dating preferences and self-reported dating behavior and by assessing subjects' evaluation of photographic evidence. While the results of the females' responses were somewhat ambiguous, the results of the responses from males revealed that shorter females were preferred as dates, were dated more frequently, and were perceived as more attractive than their more statuesque counterparts.

NOTES

¹Owing to an oversight, the male subjects in the original sample did not receive this additional questionnaire. However, data were collected on a second sample of 50 males who received this questionnaire only.

²The correlation between the attractiveness ratings supplied by male subjects for their female dates and the frequency with which they dated these females was .42.

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