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Published in:
Evolutionary Behavioral Sciences

DOI:
[10.1037/ebs0000132](https://doi.org/10.1037/ebs0000132)

IMPORTANT NOTE: You are advised to consult the publisher's version (publisher's PDF) if you wish to cite from it. Please check the document version below.

Document Version
Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

Publication date:
2019

[Link to publication in University of Groningen/UMCG research database](#)

Citation for published version (APA):

Buunk, A. P., Fernández, A. M., & Muñoz Reyes, J. A. (2019). Height as Related to Self-Perceived Mate Value and Attractiveness. *Evolutionary Behavioral Sciences*, 13(1), 93–100.
<https://doi.org/10.1037/ebs0000132>

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SHORT REPORT

Height as Related to Self-Perceived Mate Value and Attractiveness

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A study among 66 couples from Santiago, Chile examined the association between objectively assessed height and self-reports of mate value and attractiveness. In addition, assortative mating for these variables was assessed. There was some evidence for assortative mating: Although there was no correlation between the height of both partners, there were significant correlations for attractiveness and mate value. Men were taller than women, but there was no evidence for the male-taller norm. Among women, mate value and especially attractiveness were higher as they were taller, with a slight dip in mate value among women of medium height. Among men, only attractiveness was higher as they were taller. Discrepancies and similarities with previous research are discussed.

Public Significance Statement

A study among couples in Chile showed that couples tend to be similar in how attractive they consider themselves to individuals of the opposite sex. Taller men and women considered themselves more attractive than short men and women.

Keywords: height, posture, mate value, attractiveness

In most species, larger males are more likely to win fights and to attain dominance, resulting in more reproductive opportunities (e.g., Goodall, 1986; Schuett, 1997). It has even been argued that the giraffe's long neck may have evolved in part

to facilitate dominance competitions (Simmons & Scheepers, 1996). Humans are no exception in this respect: Men's height is positively associated with dominance and status (e.g., Pawlowski, 2003; Shepperd & Strathman, 1989), which in turn results in a higher attractiveness to women. For example, tall men receive relatively more replies to dating announcements (Pawlowski & Koziel, 2002), and relatively more positive responses from women in speed-dating experiments (Stulp, Buunk, Kurzban, & Verhulst, 2013). There is also substantial evidence that, in the mating domain, women's height is important, albeit in a different way than men's. In general, presumably because of their better physical and mental health (e.g., Silventoinen, Lahelma, & Rahkonen, 1999) and higher fertility (Nettle, 2002), men especially tend to prefer women of medium height, even though taller women are considered more attractive over-

This article was published Online First July 19, 2018.

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This research was supported by Grant 1140234 from the National Fund for Scientific and Technological Development, Government of Chile (2014–2016).

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all. For example, in speed-dating experiments, women of medium height receive the most positive responses from the opposite sex (Stulp et al., 2013).

As tall men and women of medium height tend to be the most popular with the opposite sex, and therefore receive more attention from the opposite sex, we would expect tall men and especially women of medium height (but also tall women) to be relatively high in self-perceived mate value and self-perceived attractiveness. However, the current evidence for this is mixed. A number of studies have found no evidence for an association between height and various measures of self-perceived attractiveness in either sex (e.g., Archer & Thanzami, 2009; Jonason, 2009; Sunderani, Arnocky, & Vaillancourt, 2013). Although an online study with more than 200,000 participants showed a positive relationship between self-assessed height and self-perceived facial, voice, body, and overall attractiveness (Manning & Quinton, 2007), to the best of our knowledge, there is no evidence among women that height is curvilinearly associated with self-perceived mate value and self-perceived attractiveness. Given this lack of consistent evidence, there is a clear need for more research to establish whether the subjective sense of one's mate value and attractiveness is related to one's height. In addition, most research in this area has employed self-reports of height, which may be subject to considerable bias (Mailhos, Buunk, & del Arca, 2017). Therefore, the present study examined in a sample of young couples from Chile whether objectively assessed height was associated with self-perceived mate value and self-perceived attractiveness, and if it was different for men and women.

Finally, for exploratory reasons, we also examined whether there was assortative mating with respect to the variables studied. Although assortative mating for self-esteem (as a proxy of mate value) has only been established in a few studies (e.g., Elfhag, Tynelius, & Rasmussen, 2010), there is more evidence for assortative mating with respect to attractiveness (e.g., Bleske-Rechek, Remiker, & Baker, 2009; Hunt, Eastwick, & Finkel, 2015). In addition, since the pioneering study by Pearson and Lee (1903), many studies in different populations have confirmed that people tend to marry partners of a similar height (e.g., Courtiol, Ray-

mond, Godelle, & Ferdy, 2010; Prichard et al., 2015). However, the degree of assortative mating for height is low: on average, .20 (Spuhler, 1982; Stulp et al., 2013). Of course, as the average man is taller than the average woman, assortative mating for height does not imply that people, on average, marry others of their own height. Even more so, a general so-called male-taller norm in married couples has been observed, with the woman being more frequently shorter than her husband than would be expected by chance (Gillis & Avis, 1980), an effect that is mainly due to women's preferences. That is, a study on speed dating found that women were most likely to choose a dater who was 25 cm taller than themselves, whereas men most likely preferred a partner who was only 8 cm shorter than themselves (Stulp et al., 2013). However, in nonwestern societies like the Tsimae in South America (Sorokowski et al., 2015) and the Himba in Namibia (Sorokowski, Sorokowska, Fink, & Mberira, 2012), the male-taller norm does not seem to be manifest. Given these conflicting results and given the fact that the present study was conducted in Chile, we also examined the difference in height between partners, and if this effect was higher than would be expected by chance.

Method

Sample

The sample consisted of 66 couples from Santiago, Chile who were recruited through social networks and university postings. Most (82%) were dating couples, 6% were married, and 12% were cohabiting. The mean age was 22.87 years ($SD = 3.02$, range = 18–33). All participants had college-level education. The mean duration of the relationship in months reported by men and women was virtually the same ($r = .99$). Therefore, we mention here the mean of both reports, which was nearly 3 years, or 34.58 months (range = 3–109 months, $SD = 27.08$).

Procedure

The ethics committee of the University of Santiago approved the informed consent and procedures of the research. People came to the lab individually to participate in a study about

couple relationships, and filled out an informed consent form before beginning their participation. Next, they completed the questionnaire measures in the lab, and their height was assessed. The questionnaire included a number of other measures that were not relevant here, nor have they been reported in other articles. The whole study took around ~1 hr.

Measures

Self-perceived attractiveness. This variable was assessed with a measure consisting of the sum of the standardized scores of an item assessing the perception of one's global attractiveness, and an item assessing the perception of one's relative attractiveness, that is, how attractive one considered him- or herself compared with others. Such comparative measures have been found to be more relevant than absolute measures because they provide individuals with a standard to assess their own characteristics (Buunk, 1998). Specifically, the scale consisted of the following two items: "How attractive do you consider yourself?" (1 = *not attractive at all* to 7 = *very attractive*), and "Compared with people of your age and sex, what is your attractiveness level in percentages?" (*from 1 to 100*). The correlation between the items was .40 for women and .70 for men. The same questions were asked for how one perceived the attractiveness of his or her partner. The correlation between both items for this measure was .70 for women and .64 for men. All four correlations were highly significant, $ps < .01$. Because we used standard scores, the means for both sexes were zero. For men, $SD = 1.84$, range = -7.76 to $+2.78$, for women, $SD = 1.67$, range = -3.42 to $+4.28$.

Self-perceived mate value. In an extensive review by Fisher, Cox, Bennett, and Gavric (2008), it was noted that there have been various perspectives on, and measures of, mate value, and that mate value should not be conceived in narrow terms, such as the waist-to-hip ratio for women or the ability to accrue resources for men. Mate value was by Fisher et al. defined as "... the total sum of characteristics an individual possesses at a given moment and within a particular context that impacts on their ability to successfully find, attract, and retain a mate" (p. 157). In line with this definition, the Components of Mate Value Survey, consisting

of 22 items, was developed by Fisher et al. (2008). According to a factor analysis, this measure includes various dimensions, for example Sociality (e.g., "I have a large network of friends"), views of the opposite sex (e.g., "Members of the opposite sex notice me"), attitudes toward parenting ("I want to have children in my lifetime"), and relationship history ("After I date someone they often want to date me again"). Each characteristic was answered on a scale that ranged from 1 = *strongly disagree* to 7 = *strongly agree*. The locally adapted Spanish version of the scale was used (Fernandez, Muñoz-Reyes, Dufey, Buccioni, & Cid, 2015); Cronbach's alpha was .80. For men, $M = 3.97$, $SD = .68$, range = 2.20–5.30; for women, $M = 3.94$, $SD = .82$, range = 2.20–6.00.

Results

Descriptive Findings

Assortative mating. We first examined how height, self-perceived attractiveness, and self-perceived mate value of both partners were related to each other. There was, unexpectedly, no correlation between the height of both partners, ($r = .00$, *ns*), suggesting that, in this sample, there was no assortative mating at all for height. There were, however, significant within-couple correlations for self-perceived attractiveness, $r = .45$, $p < .01$, attractiveness of one's partner, $r = .25$, $p < .01$, and mate value, $r = .34$, $p < .01$. Thus, in these two aspects, there was clearly some degree of assortative mating.

Sex differences. Next, we calculated sex differences in self-perceived mate value, self-perceived attractiveness, and height with a paired sample *t* test. There were no sex differences in mate value, $t(64) = .74$, $p = .46$, (for men, $M = 3.97$, $SD = .68$; for women, $M = 3.94$, $SD = .82$), nor in attractiveness, $t(64) = .12$, $p = .91$, (for men, $M = .02$, $SD = 1.85$; for women, $M = .05$, $SD = 1.67$). Men were significantly taller than their female partners, $t(64) = 11.21$, $p < .01$, (for men, $M = 174$ cm, $SD = 7.43$), for women, $M = 162$ cm, $SD = 6.89$, Cohen's $d = 1.50$). However, we did not find evidence for a male-taller norm. That is, a *t* test showed no within-couple difference be-

tween the height scores standardized within sex, $t(60) = .51, p = .61$ ($M = .09, SD = 1.40$).

Height as Associated With Self-Perceived Attractiveness and Mate Value

Next, we examined the main issue in our study, which was how height is related to self-perceived mate value and self-perceived attractiveness among men and women. Regression analyses were used to test for linear and quadratic effects. Among women, there was a significant linear relationship between height and mate value, $F(1, 63) = 5.31, R^2 = .08, p = .03$, Cohen's $f = .29$, as well as a significant quadratic relationship, $F(2, 62) = 3.41, R^2 = .10, p = .04$; Cohen's $f = .33$ (see Figure 1), with both relationships having medium effect sizes. Whereas mate value was higher as women were taller, there was a slight dip in mate value among women of medium height. Among men, there were no effects of height upon mate value: For the linear effect, $F(1, 58) = 0.60, R^2 = .01, p = .44$; for the quadratic effect, $F(2, 57) = 0.31, R^2 = .11, p = .74$ (see Figure 2).

Similar analyses for the association of height with self-perceived attractiveness showed much stronger effects for women, and also effects for men. Among women, there was a significant

linear relationship between height and attractiveness, $F(1, 63) = 16.66, R^2 = .21, p < .01$, Cohen's $f = .51$, as well as a significant quadratic relationship, $F(2, 62) = 8.20, R^2 = .21, p < .01$, Cohen's $f = .29$ (see Figure 3). The size of the linear effect was large, and the size of the quadratic effect was medium. In line with the findings for mate value, as women were taller, they felt more attractive, and, as it did as for mate value, the curvilinear trend suggested a minor dip in attractiveness among women of medium height. Among men, there was also a significant linear relationship between height and attractiveness, $F(1, 60) = 5.50, R^2 = .08, p = .02$, Cohen's $f = .29$, and also a marginally significant quadratic relationship, $F(2, 59) = 2.77, R^2 = .09, p = .07$, Cohen's $f = .31$ (see Figure 4). Both effect sizes were medium. Thus, in line with the expectations, men felt more attractive the taller they were, and, as shown in Figure 4, the curvilinear effect was not really noticeable.

Discussion

Our expectation that height would be associated with self-perceived mate value was supported among women, but not among men. Although the expected curvilinear effect did not appear, there

Figure 1. Effect of height on self-perceived mate value among women.

Figure 2. Effect of height on self-perceived mate value among men.

was, in line with the study by Manning and Quinton (2007), a linear effect with a medium effect size among women, suggesting that, at least in this sample from Chile, the taller they were, the higher women perceived their mate value. As far as we

can ascertain, this is the first study showing that objectively assessed height is related to self-perceived mate value among women. Clearly, considering that the effect was highly significant, even in this relatively small sample, this is an

Figure 3. Effect of height on self-perceived attractiveness among women.

Figure 4. Effect of height on self-perceived attractiveness among men.

important finding. Nevertheless, the finding obviously needs replication in other populations to establish whether it is robust and typical for women in general, or is dependent on specific cultural values or norms. Height is not an important factor of mate choice in all cultures (cf. Sorokowski & Butovskaya, 2012). It is, however, difficult to find reasons why the present finding would be a result of specific characteristics of Chilean culture. One possible, albeit speculative, explanation might be that in Chile, height is associated with indigenous features, as indigenous people in Chile, such as the Mapuche, are shorter than people of Caucasian descent and have relatively low socioeconomic status in Chile. Thus, taller people may have more Caucasian features (or feel they are more Caucasian), and may therefore feel more confident about their position in the “mating market.”

It must be noted that, although we found an association between assortative mating on mate value and attractiveness, and within couples, a large difference in height between men and women, we did not find evidence for assortative mating on height, nor for a male-taller norm. It seems unlikely that less variation in height in the Chilean population was responsible for these findings. For example, the standard deviations for height were similar to those in an adult sample in

the Netherlands (for men, $SD = 7.98$, for women $SD = 7.02$), even though the means in that sample were considerably higher than in the present sample (for men, $M = 180.74$, for women, $M = 168.19$; Buunk, Park, Zurriaga, Klavina, & Massar, 2008). Furthermore, as the degree of assortative mating is generally low (around .20, see Spuhler, 1982), finding no evidence for this phenomenon in a small sample of mainly dating couples is in itself not very surprising. In addition, it may be that the relationships of young couples that deviate from the male-taller norm are less stable, and may end sooner. Nevertheless, it may be that height plays a different role in the mating domain in Chilean culture than in a number of other cultures. This would also partly explain the curvilinear effect among women, which indicated a slightly *lower* rather than higher mate value among those of medium height. This was not in line with our predictions, or with the results from a speed-dating experiment indicating that women of medium height receive the most positive responses from the opposite sex (Stulp et al., 2013). However, there is evidence that, depending on the type of rival, women of medium height may be relatively more jealous, suggesting that the effect of height on mate value may also be more complex than is often assumed in research (Buunk et al., 2008).

Unexpectedly, but in line with the findings by Archer and Thanzami (2009), there was no association between height and mate value among men. This could be partly a result of our measure of mate value. It is possible that, when men are asked to rate features that are not the direct cues they consider particularly relevant for their value in a mate, such as parenting skills and social skills, their height plays only a minor role (see Fisher et al., 2008). Indeed, such characteristics may play a much more important role in the self-assessment of mate value among women (Buss, 2013). However, and in line with this interpretation, the direct measure of self-perceived attractiveness was related to height among men, with taller men perceiving themselves as more attractive. Assuming that women associate attractiveness especially with physical attractiveness, it is not surprising that, among women, attractiveness was associated in the same way with height as mate value, with taller women perceiving themselves more attractive. Even more so, this was the strongest effect (i.e., had the largest effect size) obtained in the present research. Although the curvilinear effect was hardly noticeable, it suggests again that the curvilinear effects of height on variables related to mate value may not be as straightforward as is sometimes assumed (cf. Buunk, Pollet, Klavina, Figueredo, & Dijkstra, 2009).

To conclude, the present research is, as far as we know, the first to provide unequivocal evidence that objectively assessed height is related to self-perceived attractiveness among both men and women, and to self-perceived mate value among women. By doing so, our research contributes to the emerging evidence for the important role of height in the mating domain (e.g., Courtiol et al., 2010; Pawlowski, 2003; Shepperd & Strathman, 1989; Stulp et al., 2013). From a broader perspective, the current findings do not only contribute to documenting the role of physical features affecting mate selection in humans, but also provide evidence for the important psychological consequences that height may have for self-perceptions, even in a population where, given the lack of assortative mating on height, this variable may play a different role in the mating process than in other populations.

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Received April 28, 2017

Revision received April 6, 2018

Accepted April 9, 2018 ■