

## **Similarity and Attraction in Homosexual Males: The Effects of Age and Masculinity-Femininity**

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*Recent research on homosexual partner preferences has focused on sexual attraction, but little attention has been paid to stable, long-term relationships in this population. The present research is concerned with the roles of similarity and complementarity in relatively durable relationships. One-hundred and eleven homosexual males completed a questionnaire describing themselves, including their masculinity and femininity (Bem, 1974), and characteristics of their ideal partner. Results indicated a desire for a partner who was logical and expressive, similar in age, and similar in masculinity-femininity. No special features of homosexuality nor sex roles seem necessary to explain these results.*

Researchers have recently begun investigating homosexual preferences for sexual partners (Bell & Weinberg, 1978; Masters & Johnson, 1979). However, unlike studies of heterosexual attraction, little attention has been given to factors related to preferences for stable, long-term relationships between homosexual individuals.

Two hypotheses can be generated in regard to preferences for partners in relatively long-term, homosexual relationships. The first is that individuals will prefer partners who are different from themselves. This hypothesis is consistent with the stereotype of active (male) and passive (female) roles in the homosexual dyad. It is also consistent with Tripp's (1975) theory that homosexual men feel a deficit of masculinity and that homosexual relationships represent an attempt to "import" masculinity from another man. Presumably less masculine men will have a greater need for more masculine partners.

The other hypothesis is that similarity is the major factor in long-term attractiveness. This hypothesis has received considerable support from research on

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heterosexual relationships. Thus, for engaged couples, Banta and Hetherington (1963) found relatively high levels of similarity in personality factors and attitudes. Similar results were attained by Cattell and Nesselrode (1967) for married couples.

The purpose of the present study is to test the similarity and complementarity hypotheses in regard to preferences for an ideal partner in a long-term homosexual relationship. Similarity and complementarity will be defined in terms of two characteristics that are considered important in research and theories of homosexual attraction: age and masculinity–femininity. Harry and DeVall (1978) theorize that, since the homosexual subculture is made up mostly of single men, there may be an emphasis on youthfulness that is similar to the accent on youth among heterosexuals. Harry and DeVall (1978) and Spada (1979) found homosexual males generally preferred a partner of their own age, but younger males tended to desire an older partner, and vice versa. Bell and Weinberg (1978) found that men with a high degree of masculinity are usually seen as desirable, at least as sex partners.

## METHOD

### *Subjects*

One-hundred and eleven subjects were recruited from various homosexual organizations in Toronto and Chicago. These organizations were randomly chosen within each city and appeared to be representative, at least for large cities. In each case, questionnaires were left at an appropriate location for potential subjects to complete and return anonymously. Male homosexuals were chosen as subjects because they are relatively more numerous than female homosexuals and also more likely to join clubs and groups, and are thus more accessible to research. One subject was dropped due to many unanswered questions. The average age of the subjects was 30.5 years. Fifty-one percent had completed college and an additional 34% reported some college. By occupation, 7% were unemployed, 19% were students, 16% listed themselves as blue-collar workers, 37% as white-collar workers, and 19% "other."

### *Materials*

Subjects completed a questionnaire consisting of three sections. The first section obtained the demographic data summarized above and data on the subject's siblings. This was followed by sections describing the subject's own personality and that of his ideal partner. In 52 of the questionnaires returned, the self-

description appeared first, and in the remaining 58, the partner description appeared first.

The Bem Sex Role Inventory (Bem, 1974) or BSRI was used to assess the subject's sex-role identification, providing separate scores for masculinity and femininity.

In describing their ideal male partner, subjects were told: "Imagine that this is someone you would be involved in a long-term relationship with. There may be no living person who has all the characteristics that you describe, but we are interested in the characteristics that are most important to you in a stable relationship."

The ideal partner section consisted of 48 traits rated on seven-point scales. Thirty-three of these traits were drawn from Rosencrantz et al. (1968). Twenty-three of their 29 masculine-valued traits and ten of their 12 feminine-valued traits were included; those considered redundant or inappropriate were dropped. The remaining 15 items were constructed to measure a dimension ranging from boyish to manly relating primarily to physical characteristics, e.g., "shorter-taller" and "slight-muscular." These "boyish" items were considered potentially important because a common form of institutionalized homosexuality in other cultures involves a relationship between a mature male and an adolescent (Money & Ehrhardt, 1972; Vanggaard, 1974).

The last question in the partner section asked for the age or age range preferred in a long-term partner. If an age range was given, the two end points were averaged to produce a single number. If an indeterminate age range was given, e.g., over 40, the response was considered missing.

## RESULTS

The average age of the subjects was 30.5 years, and the age of their ideal partner was 31.2 years. These ages did not differ significantly ( $t(96) = 1.60$ ). Subjects averaged virtually the same on the masculinity and femininity subscales of the BSRI (both means were 4.79). These scores are comparable to those reported in recent studies of homosexual males (Bernard & Epstein, 1978; Hooberman, 1979).

### *Ideal Partner Factor Analysis*

The 33 items from Rosencrantz et al. (1968) and the 15 items written for this study were factor analyzed using Varimax rotation with iterations. Solutions with 3-15 factors, accounting for from 28-69% of the variance, were examined. The seven-factor solution accounted for 47% of the variance and presented the most interpretable factor content.

Table I. Factor Loadings and Means for 33 Items of Partner Description<sup>a</sup>

Factor/items	Factor loadings							Mean
	I	II	III	IV	V	VI	VII	
I. Logical								
Logical (illogical) <sup>b</sup>	.66	.21	.11	.28	.04	.02	-.02	5.49
Separates feelings and ideas <sup>b</sup>	.61	.08	-.02	-.15	-.09	.03	-.07	5.25
Excitable	-.56	-.14	.10	.20	-.12	.01	-.04	2.75
Aware of others' feelings <sup>b</sup>	.50	-.03	.27	.00	.20	-.01	-.22	5.76
Direct (sneaky) <sup>b</sup>	.48	-.10	.27	.04	.03	-.04	-.05	5.85
Objective (subjective) <sup>b</sup>	.47	.30	-.11	-.13	.16	-.09	-.12	4.43
Responsible (carefree)	.41	-.01	-.35	.29	-.07	.07	-.05	4.90
II. Assertive								
Makes decisions easily	.15	.63	.00	-.16	-.10	.29	.10	5.64
Knows ways of world	.09	.60	-.09	-.14	.01	.15	-.09	5.45
Active (passive) <sup>b</sup>	.13	.58	.17	.11	-.05	-.11	-.16	4.89
Acts as leader <sup>b</sup>	.25	.53	.19	-.16	-.14	-.02	.03	4.39
Taller (shorter) <sup>b</sup>	-.03	.41	-.04	-.20	.08	.06	-.21	4.17
Aggressive	.00	.40	-.01	-.03	-.30	-.13	-.21	4.38
III. Expressive								
Hides emotions <sup>b</sup>	-.05	-.12	-.59	-.04	.15	.04	-.09	2.41
Adventurous <sup>b</sup>	.16	.23	.58	-.12	-.18	.09	.07	5.37
Emotional	-.27	-.01	.58	.07	-.10	.03	-.04	4.96
Cries	-.10	-.31	.50	-.04	-.08	.06	.09	4.35
Expresses tender feelings <sup>b</sup>	.35	.14	.49	.18	.22	-.03	.09	5.84
Warm (cold)	.29	.03	.44	.06	-.09	-.30	-.29	6.03



The seven factors that emerged are labeled logical, assertive, expressive, dependent, gentle, rugged, and youthful. Table I presents the factor loadings of those 33 items that load above .4 on a factor, with items grouped into factors. No item loaded above .4 on more than one factor. According to the item classification developed by Rosencrantz et al. (1968), the logical and assertive factors are aspects of the masculine sex role; expressive, dependent, and gentle are traditionally feminine. The rugged and youthful factors contain physical descriptions constructed for this study.

The average scores across subjects on these seven dimensions provide an overall description of the personality of the ideal partner. On a scale from 1 (very low) to 7 (very high), averaging the means of items on the same dimension, subjects wanted their partners to be logical (5.28) and expressive (5.36). They wanted moderate amounts of qualities grouped as assertive (4.82), dependent (4.15), gentle (4.39), rugged (3.51), and youthful (3.23). The most desired characteristics from individual items in Table I create an androgynous impression: warm, direct, expresses tender feelings, aware of others' feelings, and makes decisions easily.

#### *Relationship of Self and Ideal Partner*

The subjects' own characteristics were described by their age, masculinity and femininity scores on the BSRI, and family composition measured by the presence of older and younger brothers and sisters. Additionally, an interaction term was constructed as the product of the standardized scores of masculinity and femininity. The characteristics of the ideal partner consisted of the desired age of the ideal partner and the scores on the seven factors obtained by unit weighting each item loading above .4 on the dimension (summing the score for each item divided by its standard deviation).

These two sets of variables were analyzed using canonical correlation to reveal underlying relationships between combinations of variables in each set. Two significant canonical variates were obtained shown in Table II. The first consists of desired age of partner and subject's age such that a similar age is desired in the partner. The second consists of three characteristics of the partner, expressive, dependent, and logical, associated with the subject's BSRI scores, masculinity, femininity, and their interaction. The overall relationship in this canonical variate was that more masculine and less feminine subjects desired more logical and less expressive and dependent partners, and vice-versa.<sup>2</sup> The multivariate relationships were analyzed individually using these subject charac-

<sup>2</sup> Although the BSRI consists of two theoretically-independent dimensions, our use of the BSRI in this paper is as an empirical description that resulted in a single masculine-feminine dimension relevant to our concern with similarity and complementarity.

Table II. Canonical Correlation of Partner and Subject Characteristics

	Canonical variates	
	1 <sup>a</sup>	2 <sup>b</sup>
Partner characteristics		
Logical	.04	.41
Assertive	-.03	.01
Expressive	-.04	-.58
Dependent	-.08	-.60
Gentle	.04	.22
Rugged	-.07	-.12
Youthful	.22	.22
Age of partner	.96	-.28
Subject characteristics		
Masculinity	-.12	.43
Femininity	.07	-.65
Masculinity × femininity	.00	-.67
Has older sister	.01	.02
Has older brother	.08	.29
Has younger sister	.03	.05
Has younger brother	.07	.02
Age	1.00	-.04

<sup>a</sup>Canonical  $R = .81$ ;  $\chi^2(64) = 165.3$ ;  $p < .001$ .

<sup>b</sup>Canonical  $R = .52$ ;  $\chi^2(49) = 71.0$ ;  $p < .025$ .

teristics in a multiple regression equation to predict each important characteristic of the ideal partner (analogous to using MANOVA and then individual ANOVA).

*Age of the Ideal Partner.* Age of ideal partner and subject's own age correlate highly ( $r = .77$ ;  $n = 97$ ;  $p < .001$ ). Using subject's age and BSRI scores to predict partner's age, there is a significant additional effect of femininity ( $F(1,93) = 5.61$ ;  $p < .05$ ). More feminine subjects wanted partners relatively older than themselves; less feminine subjects wanted younger partners.

*Personality of the Ideal Partner.* Subjects' BSRI scores were used to predict the expressiveness, dependency, and logicalness of the desired partner in separate regression analyses. Partner's age was allowed to enter in each analysis when significant to control for any confound between desired personality and desired age of the partner. Expressiveness was predicted by partner's age ( $F(1,93) = 14.45$ ;  $p < .001$ ) and femininity ( $F(1,93) = 6.96$ ;  $p < .01$ ). Subjects who desire a younger partner, or who are more feminine, desire a more expressive partner. The relationship of femininity and expressiveness is similar when partner's age is not included ( $F(1,94) = 5.94$ ;  $p < .05$ ).

Dependency was predicted by the interaction of subjects' masculinity and femininity ( $F(1,93) = 7.82$ ;  $p < .01$ ) and to a lesser extent by masculinity

( $F(1,93) = 3.77$ ;  $p < .10$ ). Neither of these relationships change appreciably if partner's age is included in the analysis. Subjects who are low in masculinity desire a more dependent partner than subjects high in masculinity. Among subjects high in masculinity, the masculine sex-typed subjects (low in femininity) desire the least dependent partner, and the androgynous subjects (high in femininity) are intermediate.

Finally, desiring a more logical partner is not significantly predicted by partner's age or BSRI scores. The strongest predictor is subject's masculinity ( $F(1,94) = 2.95$ ;  $p < .10$ ). More masculine subjects tend to desire a more logical ideal partner.

## DISCUSSION

The results clearly establish that homosexual males desire an ideal partner who (1) possesses characteristics we label logical and expressive, (2) is similar to them in age, and (3) is similar in masculinity–femininity. Detailed analyses of the last effect reveals that subjects high in femininity desire a partner high in expressiveness (a feminine trait), subjects high in masculinity desire logical qualities in their partner (a masculine trait), and subjects low in masculinity desire a dependent partner (a feminine trait). There was no evidence that subjects generally prefer a highly masculine partner, as suggested in Tripp's (1975) theory, or that more feminine males compensate by seeking a highly masculine partner. However, it should be kept in mind that the technique of this study involved idealized preferences. More research is needed to determine if the principle of similarity applies to on-going relationships. Furthermore, the restrictive nature of the sample should be considered, a relatively young, big city population, before generalizations are made with confidence to all male homosexuals.

The strong age similarity effect was modified by a preference among subjects high in femininity for an older partner, a finding consistent with those of Freund et al. (1974) and Haist and Hewitt (1974). It seems that this effect parallels the general norm among heterosexual couples for the male to be slightly older than the female.

There was no evidence for a general preference for a "boyish" partner; subjects preferred partners to be somewhat toward the "manly" side. The preference for boyish or manly physical traits was not predicted by scores on the BSRI, age, or family composition. Apparently, boyishness, as defined in this study, is distinct from either masculinity or femininity.

Popular stereotyped opinions suggest that homosexual males' partner preferences are based on different principles than heterosexual preferences because the gender preference is atypical (Simon & Gagnon, 1967). The present research suggests, in contrast, that long-term partner preference among homosexual males



is determined by the same principles that guide heterosexual selection. The desire for a logical and expressive partner parallels the role of sincerity, honesty, competence, and self-disclosure in interpersonal attraction (Middlebrook, 1980). The fundamental importance of similarity for providing mutually-reinforcing agreement, positive social comparison, and sharing of interests (Middlebrook, 1980) seems universal in the attraction process. In a parallel vein, Storms (1980) has argued that homosexuality represents an erotic preference rather than a fundamental characteristic of sex role.

Further research is needed to explore similarity and complementarity in regard to other characteristics and among homosexual females. It seems important to adopt the perspective that homosexual attraction is fundamentally similar to heterosexual attraction, and to study long-term relationships as well as short-term sexual preferences.

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