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BRIEF REPORT

Do Women Prefer Dominant Men? The Case of the Missing Control Condition

Jerry M. Burger and Mica Cosby

Santa Clara University

Past research finds evidence that college women prefer a romantic partner who is dominant more than one who is not dominant. However, this research failed to include a control condition in which neither dominant nor nondominant behaviors are described. Study 1 and Study 2 included such a control condition and found that describing men as either dominant or nondominant decreased the desirability of hypothetical dating and romantic partners for undergraduate women. When asked to describe their ideal partner in Study 3, very few women identified *dominant* as a desirable trait. However, several traits associated with dominance, such as assertiveness and confidence, were selected. The findings suggest that a simple dominant–nondominant dimension may not be very useful when predicting women's mate preferences. © 1999 Academic Press

Do women prefer dominant men over less dominant men when looking for a dating and romantic partner? Although the suggestion that women want a dominant romantic partner may run counter to popular sentiments in American society today, an argument based on evolutionary theory can be advanced suggesting that women of child-bearing age do indeed find dominance an attractive characteristic in their male partners (Buss, 1989; Trivers, 1972). Briefly, males and females are said to select potential mating partners based on the likelihood of success at reproducing and raising the offspring to an age when they can reproduce. For females this means finding a partner who can provide protection and material support. Because a dominant male is more likely to provide these advantages, he is said to be more attractive than a less dominant male whose position in the social hierarchy renders him less likely to provide protection and support. In addition, mating with a dominant male may provide the long-term benefit of passing along to male

Address correspondence and reprint requests to Jerry M. Burger, Department of Psychology, Santa Clara University, Santa Clara, CA 95053.

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offspring the genes that help the adult obtain dominance. This analysis is referred to as the parental investment model (Trivers, 1972).

Sadalla, Kenrick, and Vershure (1987) tested the dominance hypothesis in a series of four investigations. College women were provided with videotaped or written information about the dominance of a hypothetical male student. In half the cases the male was portrayed or described as dominant, and in half he was presented as a rather nondominant or submissive person. For example, in one experiment the women read about a hypothetical person named John who enjoyed tennis. In one scenario John is said to enjoy dominating his opponents. In the other scenario John is said to be easily dominated by his opponents. In each of the four experiments, the women rated the dominant male as more sexually attractive and a more desirable dating partner than the nondominant man.

Sadalla et al. offered two explanations for their intriguing findings. First, they argue that the female's preference for a dominant partner is consistent with the parental investment model and evolutionary theory. Second, Sadalla et al. explain their results in terms of social norm expectations and violations. That is, men in our society generally are expected to act dominant, at least compared to women. Men who act in a role-appropriate manner (that is, dominant) should be more attractive than men who act in role-inappropriate ways (that is, nondominant).

These findings were extended in a series of studies by Jensen-Campbell, Graziano, and West (1995; Graziano, Jensen-Campbell, Todd, & Finch, 1997). These investigators found that the effect of dominance on attraction was moderated by the potential mate's prosocial orientation. That is, dominance was found to increase attraction only when the hypothetical partner also was high in such prosocial qualities as agreeableness and altruism. Jensen-Campbell et al. argue that their findings are not inconsistent with evolutionary personality theory or the parental investment model. Rather, they suggest that one must consider how dominance is expressed. A dominant man who obtains resources will be a desirable partner only to the extent that he is willing to share those resources with the mate and offspring. A selfish dominant partner will be of little value to a mother concerned about raising her children to child-bearing age.

Thus, there is evidence that college-age women find dominance, or at least some form of dominance, an attractive characteristic in a potential dating or sexual partner. However, a closer look at the supporting studies raises some questions about this conclusion. For example, Sadalla et al. (1987) compared the relative attractiveness of a dominant male and a nondominant male. In all four of their studies the dominant male was seen as more sexually attractive and a more desirable date. These results tell us about the relative attractiveness of the two prototypic men, but they do not tell us that women find dominance attractive. What is missing from these studies is a control condi-

tion in which the male is described as neither dominant nor nondominant. It may be the case that women find both dominance and nondominance unattractive in men, but that the nondominant man described in these studies was even more unattractive than the description of the dominant man.

We propose that college women find neither a high degree of dominance nor a high degree of nondominance attractive. First, although having a dominant partner may lead to some of the desirable consequences described by the parental investment model, becoming involved with such a man also may lead to some less than desirable consequences. For example, a dominant man might not allow his partner an equal role in decision making, may place his needs above those of his partner, and may even be more prone to violence as a means of controlling his partner. Moreover, research often finds that women are attracted to or report that they prefer men who demonstrate such characteristics as interpersonal warmth, interpersonal expressiveness, and sensitivity (e.g., Antill, 1983; Bradbury, Campbell, & Fincham, 1995; Curtis & Miller, 1986; Gilbert, Deutsch, & Strahan, 1978; Green & Kenrick, 1994). Such characteristics seem inconsistent with the description of a dominant partner.

Second, men who fall on the other end of the dominance continuum also probably are not particularly attractive dating and sexual partners. For example, in one of the Sadalla et al. studies the nondominant male was described as ''not powerful, obedient, not authoritative, avoids controlling others, yielding, and submissive.'' These characteristics also tend to be undesirable in American society. It should not be surprising from this description that the hypothetical men were not seen as desirable dates or romantic partners by the undergraduate women in the study. In short, because the characteristics associated with both dominant and nondominant men tend to be undesirable (at least as operationalized in earlier research), we expected that undergraduate women would find hypothetical men described as either dominant or nondominant less appealing than a hypothetical man described as neither dominant nor nondominant.

STUDY 1

Method

Participants. One hundred and eighteen undergraduate females participated in the experiment for class credit.

Procedure. Participants were asked to read a short description of a hypothetical person who was said to be approximately their age. Participants were randomly assigned to read one of three short descriptions of a college student named John. Participants in the Dominant condition read a description identical to the one used in the comparable condition in Experiment 2 in the Sadalla et al. (1987) research in which John is described as a highly competitive tennis player who tends to psychologically dominate his opponents. Participants in the Nondominant condition also read a description identical to that used in the Sadalla et al. research in which a noncompetitive John is said to be easily intimidated by his tennis opponents. Finally, partici-

pants assigned to the Control condition read only the first three sentences of the description used in the other two conditions. That is, these participants learned only about John's height and weight, that he has been playing tennis for a year and taking intermediate classes, and that he is coordinated and has won 60% of his matches.

After reading the description, participants were asked to provide an evaluation of the man in the description. Participants read that ''although you have very little information about John, based on what you know, what would you guess he would be like if you were to meet him and get to know him?'' As in the earlier research, participants then provided ratings on four 7-point scales. They indicated the extent to which John was dominant, a desirable date, a desirable romantic partner, and sexually attractive. The first item served as a manipulation check to see if participants perceived the men described in the three conditions as sufficiently different in their level of dominance. The items asking about dating desirability and sexual attractiveness were similar to those used in the Sadalla et al. research. We also asked about the man's desirability as a romantic partner, as suggested by Jensen-Campbell et al. (1995), because questions about a partnership seemed more relevant to the parental investment model than questions that asked only about selecting a date.

Results and Discussion

We first examine the manipulation check item to determine if participants found the men described in the scenarios to possess differing levels of dominance. A significant main effect emerged in this analysis, $F(2, 115) = 62.08$, $p < .0001$. As shown in Table 1, the women perceived different levels of dominance in the three conditions in the expected pattern. Next, we examined the ratings for each of the three dependent variables. Significant main effects emerged in each of these analyses. Participants reported different levels of desirability as a date across the three conditions, $F(2, 115) = 3.77$, $p < .03$. As shown in Table 1, the man described in the Control condition was seen as the most desirable date. When the man was described either as dominant or nondominant, his desirability as a date dropped significantly. A similar pattern was uncovered for the participants' ratings for how desirable the man would be as a romantic partner, $F(2, 115) = 5.65$, $p < .005$. As shown in the table, the man described in the Control condition was seen as significantly more desirable than either the dominant or the nondominant man. Finally,

TABLE 1
Mean Ratings by Condition

Condition	Dominant	Control	Nondominant
Dominant	2.50_a	3.38_b	5.29_c
Desirable date	3.72_b	3.11_a	3.97_b
Romantic partner	4.17_b	3.19_a	4.09_b
Sexually attractive	3.63_b	3.19_a	4.11_c

Note. All items rated on a 7-point scale, with lower score indicative of higher dominance, more desirability as a date, more desirable as a romantic partner, and more sexually attractive. Means not sharing subscripts differ significantly ($p < .05$, Newman–Keuls test).

participants found the men in the three descriptions differed in terms of their sexual attractiveness, $F(2, 115) = 4.22$, $p < .02$. As seen in Table 1, the man in the Control condition was seen as more sexually attractive than the men in the other two descriptions. In addition, participants in the Dominant condition rated the man they read about as more sexually attractive than did the participants in the Nondominant condition.

Consistent with previous research, we uncovered some evidence that undergraduate women find a dominant man more sexually appealing than a nondominant man. However, neither of the men described in these conditions was seen as sexually attractive as the man described in the Control condition. We do not interpret this to mean that the extremely brief description of the man used in the Control condition was sexually appealing. Rather, it seems that hearing about either dominant or nondominant behavior makes the man less sexually attractive. The reported desirability of this hypothetical man as a date and as a romantic partner reinforces this conclusion. Discovering either that the man is dominant or that he is nondominant lowers his desirability. At first blush, the findings also appear to be inconsistent with the dominance hypothesis derived from evolutionary personality theory. We return to this point later.

STUDY 2

The second study was designed to replicate the findings from the first study using a different set of descriptors for the potential male partner. Although the manipulation check suggests that participants found the hypothetical men appropriately dominant or nondominant, we were concerned that some characteristics in addition to dominance might be conveyed in the descriptions and that these might be responsible for the results. Thus, similar to Sadalla et al. (1987, Experiment 4), we created hypothetical profiles supposedly taken from a battery of personality tests to be used as stimulus materials in the second study.

We conducted a pilot study to determine which adjectives from the *Adjective Check List* (ACL; Gough & Heilbrun, 1983) female students would use to describe a ''dominant'' man and a man who was the ''opposite of a dominant individual.''[1] The five adjectives that emerged from the pilot study for the dominant man were *aggressive, assertive, confident, demanding,* and *dominant.* The five adjectives selected most frequently to describe the man who was the opposite of dominant were *easygoing, quiet, sensitive, shy,* and *submissive.*

[1] A more detailed description of the procedures and results of the pilot study is available from the authors.

Method

Participants. Fifty undergraduate females participated in the experiment in exchange for class credit.

Procedure. Participants were randomly assigned to one of three conditions. In the Dominant condition participants read a short paragraph about a man named John. After some general information about major, hobbies, and so on, participants read that a recent personality test found that John's five most prominent personality characteristics are aggressive, assertive, confident, demanding, and dominant. Participants in the Nondominant condition read an identical paragraph, except that the five prominent personality characteristics were identified as easygoing, quiet, sensitive, shy, and submissive. Participants in the Control condition read only the background information and learned nothing about test results. Participants then were asked to respond to the same four 7-point scale items used in the first experiment. We also used the same instructions as in the first experiment; however, we moved the manipulation check item to the end of the questionnaire. We made this last change so as to not provide participants with a clue about what we were attempting to manipulate before they responded to the dependent measures.

Results and Discussion

Responses to the manipulation check item suggest that participants perceived the men in the three descriptions as significantly different in their level of dominance, $F(2, 47) = 28.16$, $p < .0001$. As shown in Table 2, the manipulation of perceived dominance for each of the three conditions was successful. We then compared participants' responses on each of the three dependent variables across the three conditions. The means for these analyses are shown in Table 2. As in the earlier experiment, we found a significant main effect on the extent to which participants said the man in the scenario would make a desirable date, $F(2, 47) = 6.93$, $p < .003$. As predicted, participants reading about either a dominant or a nondominant male found that person a less desirable date than did women reading about the man in the control condition. Interestingly, the dominant male was seen as significantly less desirable as a date than the nondominant man.

TABLE 2
Mean Ratings by Condition

Condition	Dominant	Control	Nondominant
Dominant	2.53_a	4.53_b	5.94_c
Desirable date	5.07_c	3.37_a	4.50_b
Romantic partner	5.80_b	3.89_a	4.88_b
Sexually attractive	3.40_a	3.42_a	4.94_b

Note. All items rated on a 7-point scale, with lower score indicative of higher dominance, more desirability as a date, more desirable as a romantic partner, and more sexually attractive. Means not sharing subscripts differ significantly ($p < .05$, Newman–Keuls test).

The analysis also revealed a significant main effect for the extent to which the participants thought the men in the descriptions would make a good romantic partner, $F(2, 47) = 6.67$, $p < .003$. As in the first experiment, adding either the dominant or nondominant descriptors to the profile of the hypothetical man made him a less desirable romantic partner in the eyes of the female participants.

Finally, a significant main effect was found for the extent to which the participants found the hypothetical male sexually attractive, $F(2, 47) = 7.52$, $p < .002$. As shown in the table, the nondominant man was seen as less sexually attractive than the man described in either of the other two conditions. Interestingly, the participants' ratings of the dominant man were virtually identical to how they saw the man in the control condition. This suggests that the women were able to draw a distinction between the kind of man they found sexually attractive and the kind they would want as a date and a romantic partner. Although in this study adding the dominant characteristics to the hypothetical individual did not make him more attractive, the findings do hint that women may not reject the dominant man completely. The findings also highlight the notion that women consider many more factors than sexual attractiveness when considering potential dates and long-term relationships.

STUDY 3

The results from the first two studies suggest that undergraduate college females do not find men described with dominant characteristics more attractive than men not described this way. Indeed, in both studies the dominant characteristics appeared to make the man a less attractive dating and romantic partner. Study 3 was designed to obtain some additional information about how women feel about dominant men. We had two goals for the third study. First, we wanted to assess more directly how college women feel about men with dominant characteristics. Rather than asking women to respond to descriptions of hypothetical men, we asked women to identify the characteristics they prefer in dating and romantic partners. Included in the list of characteristics presented to the participants was the adjective *dominant.* Consistent with the findings from the first two studies and with the reasoning presented earlier, we expected that women would be less likely to select *dominant* as a desirable characteristic than they were to select other words not associated with dominance. The second goal was more of an exploratory one. Although we anticipated that women would not want a dominant man, the procedures also provided some information, albeit rather limited, about what characteristics women do find attractive in men. Specifically, we wanted to see if some of the characteristics previously found to be associated with dominance might not be viewed as desirable in a male partner. Although the absence of an appropriate control group has made it difficult to interpret the earlier

research that found women preferred dominant men, it also may be the case that the dominant men were seen as somewhat desirable in these studies because they possessed other characteristics that happened to be associated with dominance. The findings from the third experiment thus have the potential to provide some insight into this question and might also suggest a direction for future investigations.

Method

Participants. Fifty female undergraduates participated in the experiment in exchange for class credit.

Procedure. Each participant completed a short questionnaire. One part of the questionnaire included a copy of the ACL. Participants were asked to indicate which of the attributes listed on the ACL they would like to see in ''an ideal date.'' Participants were told they could check as many or as few of the attributes as they liked. Another part of the questionnaire contained another copy of the ACL. Participants were asked to indicate on this ACL the attributes they would like to see in ''an ideal romantic partner (a person with whom you have a long-term committed relationship).'' The order of the two parts of the questionnaire was reversed for approximately half of the participants.

Results and Discussion

We used the lists of adjectives for dominant and nondominant men derived from the pilot study from the second experiment. We tabulated the number of times participants indicated that their ideal date and ideal romantic partner would be *aggressive, assertive, confident, demanding,* and *dominant* (dominant adjectives) and the number of times they indicated this person would be *easygoing, quiet, sensitive, shy,* and *submissive* (nondominant adjectives). We then compared the average frequency with which participants checked these items against the average frequency with which they checked the other 280 ACL adjectives.

The percentage of participants who checked each of the 10 target adjectives and the average percentage checking the remaining ACL items is shown in Table 3. As anticipated, virtually none of the women identified *dominant* as one of the characteristics they sought in either an ideal date or a romantic partner. As shown in the table, only one participant (2% of the sample) said she wanted either her ideal date or her ideal romantic partner to be a dominant person. Thus, when asked directly whether they are attracted to a man who is dominant, the women in this study said *no.* Of course, by itself this finding does not provide strong refutation of the notion that women do find dominance attractive. It is entirely possible that the women are not aware of their preference for dominant men or that these women use the term differently than the earlier investigators. One might also argue that our participants would be reluctant to admit to this preference, even on an anonymous questionnaire. Nonetheless, the fact that women say they are not attracted to dominant men is entirely consistent with the findings from the first two studies.

TABLE 3
Percentage of Participants Selecting Adjectives

	Ideal date	Ideal romantic partner
Dominant adjectives		
Aggressive	12	12
Assertive	48*	36*
Confident	72*	74*
Demanding	0*	0*
Dominant	2*	2*
Nondominant adjectives		
Easygoing	68*	64*
Quiet	4*	2*
Sensitive	76*	76*
Shy	2*	0*
Submissive	0*	0*
Average for other ACL adjectives	21.77	22.32

* $p < .05$ when compared against the average for the remaining 280 ACL items.

The second goal of the investigation was to gain some initial insight into how women feel about men who possess some of the characteristics associated with dominance and nondominance. The preferences of the women can be rather easily discerned from Table 3. Among the dominance-associated items, the women tend to like a man who is assertive and confident, but do not want their partner to be demanding or dominant. For the nondominant-associated adjectives, the women said they prefer a man who is easygoing and sensitive, but did not want a man who is quiet, shy, and submissive. Clearly, the women found some of the characteristics associated with dominance appealing and some not, and they found some of the characteristics associated with nondominance appealing and some not. Although exploratory, the pattern of results presented in Table 3 suggests that *dominant–nondominant* may not be a useful dimension with which to predict the dating preferences of college-age women.

GENERAL DISCUSSION

The findings from the three studies suggest that college-age women do not find dominance a desirable characteristic in a man when considering him as a potential dating or romantic partner. When compared against a hypothetical man who does not possess dominant characteristics, the women find the man without these characteristics more appealing. Moreover, very few women identify *dominant* as a preferred characteristic for either a dating or romantic partner. Although these findings challenge the conclusions

drawn from earlier research, we are quick to point out that the data do not rule out the possibility that dominance may play a role in the mate-selection process in a manner consistent with the parental investment model. Nor do we want to imply that evolutionary personality theory does not provide insights into the mate-selection process. On the contrary, there are a number of studies that find support for predictions for mate selection based on an evolution theory analysis (Buss & Shackelford, 1997; Buss, Haselton, Shackelford, Bleske, & Wakefield, 1998; Feingold, 1992; Speed & Gangestad, 1997). What our findings do challenge is the conclusion that women find dominance by itself an appealing characteristic when selecting dating or romantic partners.

We also are quick to acknowledge some notable limitations of our research. First, we examined the responses of undergraduate females only. It is not clear that the findings reported here also would be found among a different population of women. However, because the earlier studies suggesting that dominance was a desirable attribute also used undergraduates as participants (Jensen-Campbell et al., 1995; Sadalla et al., 1987), we felt this was the most appropriate sample for making comparisons across investigations. Second, in the first two studies we used rather brief descriptions of hypothetical male partners. How participants respond to hypothetical people and situations may be quite different than how they act when actually engaged in mate-selection behavior. However, again we used these procedures so that we might compare our findings with those reported in the earlier studies.

Returning to the original question, do women prefer dominant men? Although we argue that the empirical evidence in support of this position is weak, we also suggest that it would be premature to dismiss this notion entirely. We believe our findings are in line with the analysis provided by Jensen-Campbell et al. (1995). Because dominance is a complex construct, knowing only that a potential mate is dominant is of limited value in predicting mate preferences. We also need to know how that characteristic is expressed and other relevant information about the potential partner. For example, a dominant male can be demanding, violent, and self-centered. He not only may dominate other men, but may treat his romantic partner the same way. Our findings suggest that something akin to this description may have been what our participants imagined when they responded to the materials in each of the three studies. However, dominance can take many forms. For example, our participants found assertive and confident men attractive. Men who dominate others because of leadership qualities and other superior abilities and who therefore are able and willing to provide for their families quite possibly will be preferred to potential partners who lack these attributes. As Jensen-Campbell et al. point out, this analysis is not inconsistent with the notion that mate preferences are based on a concern for providing

for offspring. In short, a simple dominant–nondominant dimension may be of limited value when predicting mate preferences for women. The task now facing researchers may be to pinpoint which aspects of dominant behavior and which characteristics associated with dominance women find attractive.

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