

How Low Will Men with High Self-Esteem Go? Self-Esteem as a Moderator of Gender Differences in Minimum Relationship Standards

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Abstract Men tend to establish minimum standards that are similar to those of women for high investment relationships (e.g., marriage) but set lower standards for relationships requiring less investment (e.g., a one-night stand). The purpose of the present study was to examine whether self-esteem moderates these gender differences in minimum standards for romantic relationships. This was accomplished by conducting a cross-sectional study with undergraduate participants (57 men and 124 women) from the southern region of the United States. Participants completed a self-esteem measure and reported their minimum standards for partners across various levels of relational involvement. As predicted, high self-esteem was associated with higher standards for low investment relationships among women but lower standards among men.

Keywords Self-esteem · Relationships · Minimum standards · Mate value

Introduction

How do individuals go about establishing their standards for romantic partners? That is, how do people determine whether potential partners are good enough for them or not? When considering this sort of issue, social psychologists have often drawn upon social exchange models (e.g., Benu 1977; Blau 1964; Hatfield et al. 1984; Homans 1961; Murstein et al. 1977; Thibaut and Kelley 1959). These

models propose that individuals will seek the highest quality mates they believe they are capable of attracting based on their ability to exchange their own assets for those possessed by their potential romantic partners (e.g., an attractive young woman entering into a romantic relationship with a wealthy older man). Self-appraisal is at the very core of these social exchange models such that those individuals who evaluate themselves positively are thought to set relatively high standards for potential partners compared to the standards established by those with less positive self-evaluations. The purpose of the present study was to examine whether self-esteem was associated with the minimum standards that men and women in the southern region of the United States establish for potential romantic partners across various levels of relational involvement. More specifically, we were interested in whether self-esteem would moderate the gender differences in minimum standards that have been observed in previous research.

Social exchange models are certainly helpful for understanding the decisions that individuals make about potential partners but these are not the only ways available for thinking about romantic relationships. In recent years, evolutionary psychology has become an increasingly important framework for understanding human behavior in domains such as mating. In many ways, evolutionary models and social exchange models are quite similar. For example, both models emphasize the role of resource exchange in driving the mate selection process (Kenrick and Trost 1989). Despite their basic similarities, however, evolutionary models and social exchange models differ in important ways. One area of divergence concerns the prediction of gender differences in relationship standards. According to social exchange models, men and women should establish relatively similar minimum standards for relationship partners across all levels of relational involve-

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ment such that both should always strive to attract the highest quality mates possible. In contrast, evolutionary models predict that men will set lower minimum standards than women for low investment relationships because men have a strong desire for sexual variety as well as the option of withholding investment in offspring resulting from sexual encounters with partners of relatively low quality (Buss and Barnes 1986; Daly and Wilson 1983; Kenrick and Keefe 1992; Trivers 1972).

Both men and women show preferences for high-quality mates who are dependable, kind, and trustworthy; however, men tend to show a greater interest in sexual variety than is commonly expressed by women (see Penke et al. 2007, for a review). Compared to women, for example, men tend to report a higher number of desired sexual partners (Buss and Schmitt 1993; Fenigstein and Preston 2007; Leitenberg and Henning 1995; Pedersen et al. 2002; Schmitt et al. 2003), express greater willingness to have sex with a new partner after a relatively short period of time (Clark and Hatfield 1989; Schmitt et al. 2003), express more positive attitudes toward sexual promiscuity (Buss and Schmitt 1993; Oliver and Hyde 1993; Schmitt et al. 2003; Schmitt 2005a, b), report less regret following a short-term sexual affair (Campbell 2008; Townsend 1995; Townsend et al. 1995), and be less selective during speed-dating events (Kurzban and Weeden 2005). These results concerning the desire for sexual variety and interest in short-term, low investment relationships are among the largest gender differences in psychology (Hyde 2005). These differences can be largely explained by sex differences in parental investment (i.e., resources expended by the parent to increase the reproductive success of offspring) which places a significantly greater burden on women than men (Trivers 1972).

As a result of their desire for sexual variety, men tend to be more willing than women to adopt less stringent standards for low investment relationship partners because these encounters satisfy their desire for sexual variety and involve comparably little risk for the men who pursue these sorts of relationships. In support of this relationship-qualified parental investment model, a number of studies have found that men set minimum standards that are similar to those of women for high investment relationships (e.g., marriage) but much lower standards for low investment relationships (e.g., a one-night stand; Kenrick et al. 1990; Regan 1998; Stewart et al. 2000; Woodward and Richards 2005). Of course, the fulfillment of men's desire for low investment relationships depends on their ability to find women who are willing to engage in these sorts of relationships. In the past, researchers struggled to explain the reasons why women would engage in these sorts of encounters. More recent work, however, has proposed a number of potential benefits for women who pursue multiple short-term partners including the ability to attain

high-quality genes for offspring, increase the genetic diversity of offspring, promote sperm competition, receive immediate resources, and evaluate short-term mates as potential long-term partners (Bleske and Buss 2000; Gangestad and Simpson 2000; Hrdy 1981; Jennions and Petrie 2000; Schmitt 2005c; Shackelford et al. 2005; Smuts 1985). It does appear, however, that women are highly selective with regard to the partners they select for these short-term relationships. That is, women tend to focus on high-quality partners (e.g., physically attractive, access to resources) for these sorts of relationships (Gangestad and Simpson 1990; Kenrick et al. 1993; Regan 1998; Scheib 2001; Schmitt 2005c; Sprecher and Regan 2002).

Self-Esteem and Romantic Relationships

Self-esteem is a form of global self-evaluation that is thought to guide the behavior of individuals in certain areas of their lives (see Swann et al. 2007, for a review). Consistent with social exchange models, we propose that self-esteem may be relevant to romantic relationships such that the degree to which individuals feel positively about themselves may have an influence on the minimum standards they establish for their relationship partners. In general, it is believed that the self-evaluations of individuals should focus their attention on potential romantic partners who possess similar mating assets so that individuals do not waste their time in the futile pursuit of potential partners who are out of their league or, at the other extreme, settle for mates with far fewer social assets than they possess themselves (e.g., Dawkins 1982; Gilbert et al. 1995; Kenrick et al. 1993; Sloman and Sloman 1988; Todd and Miller 1999; Tooby and Cosmides 1990; Trivers 1972). That is, individuals could show a simple preference for the highest quality potential mates available. However, this approach ignores the fact that relationship choices are not one-sided but require agreement from both individuals involved. As a result, individuals who fail to incorporate self-evaluations of their own mate value into their decisions about potential partners may either face constant rejection from pursuing partners for whom they are not attractive or accepting relationships with partners who possess relatively low levels of mate value.

The idea that self-esteem may be useful when making decisions concerning romantic relationships is consistent with the sociometer model developed by Leary and his colleagues (Leary and Baumeister 2000; Leary and Downs 1995). According to the sociometer model, self-esteem has a status-tracking property such that an individual's self-esteem is dependent on his or her level of relational value. The sociometer model proposes that self-esteem is an evolutionary adaptation that allows individuals to monitor their relational value (Leary 1999, 2005; Leary et al. 1998;

Leary and MacDonald 2003). Consistent with the sociometer model, an impressive amount of empirical support has demonstrated that self-esteem is responsive to social acceptance and rejection (e.g., Leary et al. 2001). Building on the foundation provided by sociometer theory, Kirkpatrick and Ellis (2001, 2006) have suggested that sociometer theory should be expanded beyond relational value to incorporate multiple sociometers monitoring other dimensions such as mate value. This proposal is consistent with previous research and theory linking self-esteem with mate value (e.g., Brase and Guy 2004; Dawkins 1982; Kenrick et al. 1993; Hill and Reeve 2004; Shackelford 2001; Tooby and Cosmides 1990; Trivers 1972; Wright 1994). For example, Brase and Guy (2004) found that indicators of mate value (e.g., self-rated mate value, age, marital status) were associated with self-esteem. That is, individuals with higher mate value—or, at the very least, those who perceived themselves as possessing higher mate value—tended to report higher levels of self-esteem.

Importantly, the associations between self-evaluations and relationship standards have been found to differ depending on the level of relational involvement. For high investment relationships, previous research has clearly shown that domain-specific self-evaluations are associated with minimum standards such that those individuals with more positive self-evaluations in particular domains tend to require more from potential partners than those with less positive self-evaluations (Buunk et al. 2002; Kenrick et al. 1993; Regan 1998). The answer is more complex for low investment relationships, however, because gender differences have consistently emerged such that the associations between self-evaluations and minimum standards are significantly weaker for men than for women (e.g., Kenrick et al. 1993). That is, women who view themselves positively on specific dimensions tend to demand more than other women from their potential partners on these same dimensions at all levels of relational involvement, whereas men who view themselves positively are no more discriminating than other men with regard to low investment relationship partners. The role of self-evaluations in determining minimum relationship standards may suggest that social exchange and evolutionary models of relationship standards should be more fully integrated as suggested by Kenrick and his colleagues (1993).

It is important to note, however, that previous research concerning the role of self-views in the development of relationship standards has focused exclusively on domain-specific self-evaluations (e.g., does an individual's self-rated attractiveness influence his or her minimum standards concerning a partner's attractiveness?). Although they are frequently overlooked, there are important distinctions between domain-specific self-evaluations and global levels of self-esteem (e.g., Bernichon et al. 2003; Brown and

Dutton 1995; Brown and Marshall 2006; Dutton and Brown 1997). For example, an individual who believes that he or she has certain characteristics or abilities (i.e., domain-specific self-evaluations) does not necessarily possess high self-esteem (Marsh et al. 2006; Pelham 1995). In addition, domain-specific self-evaluations and global self-esteem have been found to influence different aspects of adjustment (e.g., reactions to success and failure; see Brown and Marshall 2006, for a review). The differences between domain-specific self-evaluations and global self-esteem leave open the possibility that global self-esteem may have a somewhat different pattern of associations with minimum relationship standards than has previously been observed for domain-specific self-evaluations.

Overview and Predictions

Previous research has shown that women tend to establish higher minimum standards for relationship partners than men (e.g., Kenrick et al. 1993). Further, these gender differences are strongest for low investment relationships such as a one-night stand. Based on these findings, we developed the following hypotheses:

- Hypothesis 1: Women will establish higher minimum standards than men across all levels of relational involvement.
- Hypothesis 2: Gender differences in minimum relationship standards will be greatest for low investment relationships.

Domain-specific self-evaluations have been found to be associated with higher minimum standards for high investment relationships (e.g., marriage) among both men and women (e.g., Kenrick et al. 1993). Consistent with social exchange models, individuals who view themselves positively tend to demand more from potential partners for serious relationships than those with less positive self-views because they believe they have more to offer. We predicted that a similar pattern would emerge for self-esteem because it is believed to serve as a barometer of one's perceived mate value (e.g., Dawkins 1982; Kenrick et al. 1993; Kirkpatrick and Ellis 2001, 2006; Wright 1994).

- Hypothesis 3: Self-esteem will be positively associated with minimum standards for high investment relationships.

We expected that high levels of self-esteem would also be associated with higher minimum standards for women considering low investment relationship partners. We believed that the relatively high levels of risk associated with short-term encounters for women (e.g., unintended pregnancy, sexually transmitted diseases) would lead them to maintain at least somewhat high minimum standards and

to base these standards on their own feelings of self-worth. In contrast, we predicted that men with high self-esteem would actually report *lower* minimum standards for low investment relationships than men with low self-esteem. The underlying rationale for this hypothesis was that men with high self-esteem would be more likely to expect greater success when pursuing low investment relationship opportunities than men with low self-esteem (Gangestad and Simpson 2000; Penke et al. 2007). Although men show a general preference for sexual variety and short-term mating tactics, not all men will be able to satisfy this desire because the women who are willing to engage in short-term sexual encounters tend to show a strong preference for high-quality partners (Kenrick et al. 1990; Li et al. 2002; Regan 1998). That is, only men with relatively high levels of mate value—and the corresponding high levels of self-esteem according to the mate value sociometer (Kirkpatrick and Ellis 2001)—may be successful in pursuing short-term mating tactics. Due to the costs associated with repeatedly failing to secure short-term mates (e.g., lost time and resources), men with low self-esteem may be less likely to pursue these sorts of relationships and, as a consequence, may not show the same downward adjustment in standards for low investment relationships.

Men with high self-esteem may also be more willing than those with low self-esteem to accept the risks that accompany low minimal standards for low investment relationship partners such as social exclusion and the potential reputational damage that may stem from being associated with a low quality partner (Allen and Badcock 2003). This prediction is consistent with previous research showing that individuals with high self-esteem are more accepting of risk than those with low self-esteem (Baumeister et al. 1989; Brown 1998; Josephs et al. 1992; Landau and Greenberg 2006; Spencer et al. 1993) and better able to deal with the potential negative consequences associated with risky strategies (Bernichon et al. 2003; Blaine and Crocker 1993; Brown et al. 2001; Brown and Gallagher 1992).

Hypothesis 4: Self-esteem will be *positively* associated with minimum standards for low investment relationship partners among women, whereas self-esteem will be *negatively* associated with the minimum standards of men for these relationships.

Method

Participants and Procedure

Participants were 181 students (57 men and 124 women) enrolled in undergraduate psychology courses at a univer-

sity in the southern region of the United States who participated in return for partial fulfillment of a research participation requirement. The mean age of participants was 20.27 years ($SD=2.30$). The racial/ethnic composition was 72% White, 23% Black, 2% Hispanic, and 3% Other. During a laboratory session, participants were asked to complete a measure of self-esteem and report their minimum standards across various levels of relational involvement.

Self-Esteem

The Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (RSES; Rosenberg 1965) is a 10-item measure of global self-esteem. Participants were instructed to complete the scale according to how they typically or generally feel about themselves (e.g., “I am able to do things as well as most other people”). Responses were made on scales ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*). Self-esteem scores were created by averaging the items from the RSES. The RSES has been shown to be a well-validated and reliable measure of global self-regard (Blaskovich and Tomaka 1991; Demo 1985; Rosenberg 1965; Silber and Tippett 1965). For the present sample, the internal consistency of the RSES was .84.

Minimum Standards

Following the procedure used by Kenrick and his colleagues (Kenrick et al. 1990, 1993), participants were asked to consider their criteria for choosing a relationship partner for (a) a single date, (b) a one-night stand, (c) recurring sexual relations, (d) steady dating, and (e) marriage. Participants were asked to provide the minimum percentile they would find acceptable for various attributes. Several examples were provided to participants to clarify any questions about the percentile concept. For ease of understanding, participants were instructed to use 100 to indicate an individual who was above the rest of the population and 0 to indicate someone below the rest of the population. The attributes included in the present study were taken from previous studies concerning minimum relationship standards (Buss and Barnes 1986; Kenrick et al. 1990, 1993): *dominant, powerful, aggressive, high social status, ambitious, wealthy, educated, good earning capacity, physically attractive, sexy, healthy, wants children, good housekeeper, religious, easygoing, friendly, kind and understanding, popular, exciting personality, good sense of humor, wants to be with others, creative and artistic, intelligent, cultured, intellectual, conscientious, punctual, and careful*. Composite minimum standards were computed by averaging these attributes for a single date ($\alpha=.94$), a one-night stand ($\alpha=.97$), sexual relations ($\alpha=.82$), steady dating ($\alpha=.96$), and marriage ($\alpha=.93$). These percentile scores were relatively normal in terms of their distributional properties with

indicators of skew ranging from $-.48$ to $-.01$ and markers of kurtosis falling between $-.54$ and $.19$.

Results

Descriptive Statistics

Table 1 presents the intercorrelations and descriptive statistics for self-esteem and minimum standards in the present study. Previous research has found modest gender differences in self-esteem levels such that men often report slightly higher levels of global self-esteem (Kling et al. 1999; Major et al. 1999; Twenge and Campbell 2001) and certain domain-specific self-evaluations than women (e.g., appearance; Gentile et al. 2009). For the present study, however, gender differences did not emerge for self-esteem ($M_{Men}=3.94$, $M_{Women}=3.99$; $t[179]=.46$, *ns*). Although a gender difference in self-esteem level was not found, it is important to note that the associations between self-esteem and minimum standards were different for men and women. For women, self-esteem was positively correlated with minimum standards across all levels of relational involvement except for a single date. That is, the only time that the self-esteem of women was not associated with their minimum relationship standards was for the type of relationship requiring the least investment for them. In contrast, the self-esteem of men was *negatively* associated with minimum standards for the relationships involving the least investment. That is, men with higher levels of self-esteem reported lower minimum standards for these relationships than men with lower levels of self-esteem. For those relationships that involved recurring interactions, the self-esteem of men was not associated with their minimum standards.

Preliminary analyses also examined potential racial differences in self-esteem level and minimum relationship standards. The results of these comparisons did not reach conventional levels of statistical significance ($F_s < 1.39$, *ns*).

It is also important to note that adding racial/ethnic background to the analyses reported in the following sections did not qualify the results. As a consequence, racial/ethnic background will not be discussed further.

Self-Esteem as a Moderator of Gender Differences for Minimum Relationship Standards

The purpose of the present analyses was to examine whether self-esteem moderates the gender differences that have previously been observed for minimum relationship standards at various levels of relational involvement. To accomplish this, we conducted a 2 (Gender: Men vs. Women) \times 5 (Level of Relational Involvement: Single Date vs. One-Night Stand vs. Sexual Relations vs. Steady Dating vs. Marriage) mixed-design analysis of variance (ANOVA) with level of relational involvement as a within-subjects factor and self-esteem level as a covariate. Consistent with previous research (e.g., Kenrick et al. 1990) and Hypothesis 1, this mixed-design ANOVA revealed a significant main effect for gender ($F[1, 177]=28.52$, $p < .001$) such that women reported higher minimum standards than men across all levels of relational involvement. The main effect of relational involvement was also significant ($F[4, 708]=79.51$, $p < .001$) and revealed a linear pattern ($F[1, 177]=278.00$, $p < .001$) indicating that participants reported higher minimum standards as the level of relationship involvement increased.

The prediction for Hypothesis 2 was that the gender differences in minimum standards would be greatest for low investment relationships. Consistent with this prediction, the interaction of gender and level of relational involvement reached conventional levels of significance ($F[4, 708]=11.28$, $p < .001$). Follow-up analyses revealed that women reported higher minimum standards than men at each level of relational involvement but that these differences were largest for low investment relationships such as a one-night stand, $F_s > 9.34$, $p_s < .01$. These results are consistent with previous research (e.g., Kenrick et al. 1993) showing that

Table 1 Interrelations and descriptive statistics for measures of self-esteem and minimum relationship standards.

Correlations for women ($n=124$) are presented above the diagonal. Correlations for men ($n=57$) are presented below the diagonal. Self-esteem scores had a theoretical range of 1–5, whereas scores for the minimum standards could range from 0 to 100.

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$.

	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. Self-Esteem	—	.12	.21*	.21*	.23*	.22*
2. Minimum Standard for a Single Date	-.33*	—	.58***	.48***	.75***	.75***
3. Minimum Standard for a One-Night Stand	-.29*	.34**	—	.57***	.63***	.60***
4. Minimum Standard for Sexual Relations	.07	.59***	.70***	—	.68***	.62***
5. Minimum Standard for Steady Dating	.01	.78***	.43***	.82***	—	.94***
6. Minimum Standard for Marriage	.03	.80***	.22	.73***	.93***	—
<i>M Women</i>	3.99	64.30	60.62	67.95	70.96	74.67
<i>SD Women</i>	.68	15.72	20.79	20.40	12.92	12.91
<i>M Men</i>	3.94	55.42	43.00	49.27	63.42	68.16
<i>SD Men</i>	.86	16.15	23.15	17.76	17.74	14.01

women tend to report higher minimum standards than men in general but that this gender difference is most pronounced for low investment relationships.

In Hypothesis 3, we predicted that self-esteem level would be associated with higher minimum standards for high investment relationships because individuals who view themselves positively would want more from high investment relationship partners than those with low self-esteem because they believe they have more to offer prospective partners. Although the main effect of self-esteem failed to reach conventional levels of significance ($F[1, 177]=1.22$, *ns*), the interaction of self-esteem and level of relational involvement was significant ($F[4, 708]=3.43$, $p<.01$). Consistent with Hypothesis 3, follow-up analyses confirmed that self-esteem was associated with higher minimum standards for high investment relationships ($F_s>3.94$, $p_s<.05$) but not low investment relationships ($F_s<1.14$, *ns*).

Hypothesis 4 proposed that self-esteem would be positively associated with minimum standards for low investment relationships among women but would be negatively associated with these standards among men. Consistent with this hypothesis, the three-way interaction of gender, level of relational involvement, and self-esteem was significant ($F[4, 708]=3.12$, $p<.05$; see Fig. 1). Follow-up analyses found that the interaction of self-esteem and relational involvement emerged for men ($F[4, 220]=3.72$, $p<.01$) but not women ($F[4, 488]=1.20$, *ns*). These findings reflect the differences in associations between self-esteem and minimum standards observed among men for low investment relationships involving a single encounter ($F_s>3.62$, $p_s<.05$) and high investment relationships requiring multiple encounters ($F_s<1$, *ns*).

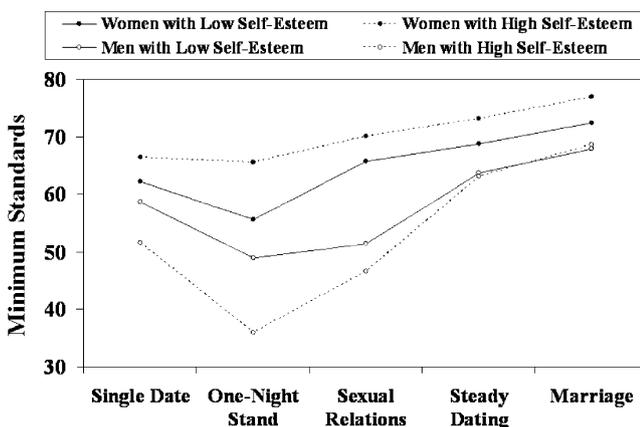


Fig. 1 Predicted values for minimum standards across the levels of relational involvement, illustrating the interaction of gender and self-esteem (at values that are one standard deviation above and below its mean).

Discussion

The present results found that men tend to report minimum standards that are similar to those of women for high investment relationship partners but much lower standards for low investment relationship partners. For example, women established minimum standards for a one-night stand that were much higher than those of men but these gender differences were greatly attenuated for high investment relationships such as steady dating and marriage where the potential investment of men approaches that of women. In addition to supporting Hypotheses 1 and 2, these results are consistent with previous research (Buunk et al. 2002; Kenrick et al. 1990, 1993; Regan 1998; Stewart et al. 2000; Woodward and Richards 2005). These findings provide further support for the relationship-qualified parental investment model introduced by Kenrick and his colleagues (1990, 1993) which suggests that men are not very selective when considering relationships for which their potential investment is much lower than that of women even though their standards approach those held by women for high investment relationships because their potential investment is somewhat comparable.

More important than the replication of previous findings concerning the relationship-qualified parental investment model was the finding that gender differences in minimum standards for low investment relationship partners were moderated by self-esteem (Hypotheses 3 and 4). For women, higher levels of self-esteem were generally associated with higher minimum standards for partners at all levels of relational involvement. Similar effects have previously been observed for women such that those with more positive self-evaluations in a particular domain often established relatively high minimum standards for potential partners in that same domain (e.g., Kenrick et al. 1993). These findings illustrate the importance of resource exchange for women when they consider potential romantic partners such that women who perceive themselves as possessing more social resources have more demanding standards than those who view themselves as having fewer social resources.

A very different pattern emerged for men. In contrast to the results for women, higher levels of self-esteem were associated with lower minimum standards for low investment relationship partners among men. We believe the most likely explanation for this pattern of results is that men with high self-esteem are more likely to pursue these sorts of relationships because of their greater expectation of success and their willingness to accept the risks associated with low minimum standards for these sorts of relationships. That is, men with high self-esteem tend to be very confident about the value of their traits (Campbell 1990; Campbell et al. 1996) and, as a result, may be less concerned about the implications that short-term encounters with relatively low

quality women may have for their reputations. Men with low self-esteem, in contrast, may be at least somewhat more concerned about the implications that a relatively low quality partner may have for their reputations. That is, men with low self-esteem may maintain their standards for low investment relationship partners due, at least in part, to concerns that forming relationships with less desirable partners may reflect negatively on them or result in other negative outcomes such as social rejection, unwanted pregnancy, or sexually transmitted disease. Consistent with the social risk hypothesis (Allen and Badcock 2003), short-term encounters with unattractive partners may not be particularly desirable for men with low self-esteem because of the implications of these encounters for their own mate value in the eyes of themselves and others.

It should be noted that the explanations presented for the current findings are based on a process model which assumes that self-esteem is a relatively stable feature of the individual that exists prior to the establishment of minimum relationship standards and influences the creation of such standards. However, the data in the present study cannot rule out the possibility that the direction of causality may be either bidirectional or reversed. For example, it may be the case that relationship standards influence self-esteem such that men who establish low standards for low investment relationship partners may feel better about themselves because they are able to find romantic partners somewhat easily. This is at least somewhat consistent with the tendency for individuals—especially men—to report using sex to enhance their self-esteem (Davis et al. 2004). Of course, it is also possible that self-esteem and minimum relationship standards are both by-products of some third variable such as attachment style. Future research should attempt to clarify the underlying causal processes that link self-esteem and minimum relationship standards.

There are at least three important limitations associated with the present study. First, the present study relied exclusively on self-reports of minimum relationship standards. This is a potential limitation because the minimum standards that individuals express for various relational activities may not match their *actual* minimum standards for these sorts of relationships. It remains unclear, for example, whether men with high self-esteem would actually use such low standards when considering low investment relationship partners outside of the laboratory. This is a concern because a recent study has suggested that individuals may lack introspective access to the standards they have for romantic partners by showing that ideal preferences failed to predict who individuals were actually attracted to during a speed-dating event (Eastwick and Finkel 2008).

The second limitation is that the participants for the present study were living in the southern region of the United States. This is an important limitation in terms of generalizability

because the social environment appears to influence the selectivity of individuals. For example, individuals tend to evaluate potential mates less positively following exposure to highly attractive targets (Kenrick and Gutierrez 1980; Kenrick et al. 1989; Melamed and Moss 1975). This suggests that living in densely populated areas could have an influence on selectivity because of increased exposure to highly attractive potential partners. As a result, it is unclear how the present results would generalize to individuals in areas that were more or less densely populated. In addition to concerns about population density, the location of the study also limits generalizability because of the important role that culture plays in determining selectivity. For example, Americans tend to be somewhat less selective than Germans when evaluating potential mates (see Penke et al. 2007, for a review). Self-esteem levels have also been found to differ across cultures (e.g., Chen 2008; Schmitt and Allik 2005) and the association between self-esteem and minimum relationship standards has not been systematically examined across cultures. As a result, it is unclear whether the present results would adequately represent the role that self-esteem plays in the mating decisions of individuals from other cultures.

The third limitation of the present study concerns the age of the participants. The sample consisted entirely of undergraduate students ranging from 18 to 32 years of age with an average age of just over 20 years. The relative homogeneity of ages in the present sample makes it difficult to speculate as to whether similar results would emerge for older adults who had more experience with romantic relationships and may have a better sense of the minimum standards they require for potential partners in order to be satisfied (e.g., Todd and Miller 1999).

In summary, the results of the present study demonstrate that gender differences in minimum standards for low investment relationship partners are qualified by self-esteem. Among women, higher levels of self-esteem were associated with higher minimum standards for partners across various types of relationships. The reverse pattern was found among men considering low investment relationships. That is, men with higher levels of self-esteem were found to establish lower minimum standards for low investment relationships than men with lower self-esteem. These findings extend previous research in this area by demonstrating that self-esteem moderates the gender differences that have previously been observed for minimum standards in low investment relationships.

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