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Authors

Menkin, Josephine A
Robles, Theodore F
Wiley, Joshua F
et al.

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Online Dating Across the Life Span: Users' Relationship Goals

Josephine A. Menkin[a], **Theodore F. Robles**[a], **Joshua F. Wiley**[b,c], and **Gian C. Gonzaga**[d]

[a]Department of Psychology, University of California – Los Angeles

[b]Centre for Primary Care and Prevention at the Mary MacKillop Institute for Health Research at the Australian Catholic University

[c]Centre for Primary Care and Prevention at the Mary MacKillop Institute for Health Research at the Elkhart Group Ltd

[d]Netflix

Abstract

Utilizing data from an eHarmony.com relationship questionnaire completed by new users ($N =$ 5,434), this study identifies prioritized goals in new romantic relationships and whether importance of these goals differ by participants' age and gender. Overall, users valued interpersonal communication more than sex appeal. Older users rated sexual attraction as slightly less important than younger users did, but they still highly valued the goal. Women placed even greater emphasis on communication over sexual attraction compared to men. However, although men valued sexual attraction more than women at all ages, only the youngest women valued interpersonal communication more than young men.

Keywords

Online dating; aging; gender; relationship goals

Media headlines like "Online dating enjoying a boom among boomers," and "Second love at first click," suggest a rise in older adults using online dating (e.g., Goehner, 2010; Rosenbloom, 2011). Unfortunately, there is little research on the development of new romantic relationships among older compared to younger adults, but preferences may change with age due to developmental changes and life experiences such as divorce. We examined prioritized goals for new romantic relationships, and whether the importance of these goals varied by age and gender in a large sample of adults using the online dating service eHarmony.com.

Intimate Relationship Goals

What do people want from a potential romantic relationship? Companionship and sexual attraction are common relationship goals, as evidenced by the prevalence of the themes of warm, friendship-based love and more sexual, passionate love across most major love

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Josephine Menkin, Department of Psychology, University of California – Los Angeles, Los Angeles, CA 90095. jmenkin@ucla.edu.

theories (see meta-analyses by Graham, 2011; Masuda, 2003). People differ in their relative valuation of these goals, which can be assessed by having individuals rate the importance of characteristics in a partner that reflect these goals. Undergraduates tend to desire positive internal traits (e.g., trustworthiness) more than external traits (e.g., physical appearance; Regan, Levin, Sprecher, Christopher, & Cate, 2000). Although this work was with young adults, we expect that sexual attraction and traits facilitating companionship will both be highly valued, but that companionship might be even more important than sexual attraction, at all ages.

Most research on partner preferences has been done with young adults (under 40 years old), but there is growing interest in middle age (age 40-59), young-old (60-74), and even old-old (75+) adults' new romantic relationships[1]. Yet, research on romantic relationship pursuit later in life has been largely restricted to small qualitative studies of young-old adults, with companionship the most widely cited reason for dating (e.g., Stevens 2002). From these interviews, companionship appears paramount, with sex being merely "frosting on the cake" (Bulcroft & O'Connor, 1986, p.400). However, desire for physical intimacy is not always differentiated from "need for companionship", so the relative weight older adults place on emotional compared to physical intimacy when seeking romantic relationships is unclear (Dickson, Hughes, & Walker, 2005; Watson & Stelle, 2011). In a rare quantitative survey of over 3,000 singles aged 40-69, almost half of the participants reported their most important reason for dating was "to have someone to talk to or do things with"; however, sexual fulfillment was still an important goal for many dating older adults (Montenegro, 2003). A recent content analysis of online personal ads for men and women over age 40 found that romantic activities and sexual interests were mentioned at similar rates among the middle age and young-old age groups, but were significantly less likely to be mentioned by participants in the old-old age group. In contrast, the young-old and old-old age groups were more likely to mention loneliness than middle age participants, reflecting desire for companionship (Alterovitz & Mendelsohn, 2013).

Theoretical perspectives on relationship goals, aging, and gender

Developmental changes may increase the value and salience of companionship compared to passion or physical attraction. Older adults prefer low arousal (e.g., calm) relative to high arousal positive emotions (e.g., excited) compared to younger adults (Scheibe, English, Tsai, & Carstensen, 2013). Given that sexual attraction is a high intensity, excited state and companionship elicits low arousal positive emotion, older adults may correspondingly have a greater preference for companionship relative to sexual attraction compared to younger adults.

Gender differences in partner preferences are often subtle but are worth considering. Although men and women generally want similar things from a romantic partner, men value physical appearance more than women do (Buss, Shackelford, Kirkpatrick, & Larson, 2001) even in later life (Alterovitz & Mendelsohn, 2009). Women tend to emphasize the

[1]These age groups have been used in previous research on cognitive aging as well as relationship research (e.g., Alterovitz & Mendelsohn, 2013), and they are consistent with age groups used by the U.S. Census Bureau.

desirability of personality characteristics like kindness and consideration more than men (Buss & Barnes, 1986), though gender differences in this preference can disappear when both young men and women are seeking a long-term relationship (Regan et al., 2000). Among 40-69 year olds, men were still more likely than women to say the most important reason for dating was to fulfill their sexual needs (Montenegro, 2003). Therefore men may value sexual attraction more compared to women across the lifespan, and women might also value companionship more than men.

Purpose of the Current Study

Popular media claimed adults 55 years of age and older were the largest demographic using dating websites in 2011 (Rosenbloom, 2011). Yet, researchers have only recently begun to examine older users' online dating data, and only one other study to our knowledge has focused on relationship goals (Alterovitz & Mendelsohn, 2013). Past research focused on dating profiles and personal ads that contain demographic preferences and open-ended responses (Alterovitz & Mendelsohn, 2009; Alterovitz & Mendelsohn, 2013; McIntosh, Locker, Briley, Ryan, & Scott, 2011). In contrast, the online dating site eHarmony.com collects extensive, quantitative assessments of all users' characteristics and goals through a mandatory questionnaire.

Identifying prioritized goals

In this paper, we first identified principal relationship goals from eHarmony's questionnaires by conducting a factor analysis. We expected that latent variables representing companionship and sexual attraction would emerge in a factor analysis of the eHarmony relationship questionnaire items, and that both younger and older users would place greater importance on companionship than on sexual attraction (Hypothesis 1). We then assessed how the importance of these goals differed by age and by gender.

Age and gender differences in importance of goals

We hypothesized that older adults might value sexual attraction slightly less than younger users (Hypothesis 2A) and focus more on companionship (Hypothesis 2B). Moreover, we tested whether gender differences observed in younger samples also exist among older adults. We expected men to value sexual attraction (Hypothesis 3A) and women to value companionship (Hypothesis 3B), relatively more than the opposite gender at any age. We expected women at all ages to place even more emphasis on companionship versus sexual attraction compared to men (Hypothesis 3C).

Methods

Participants

In collaboration with eHarmony Research Labs (Santa Monica, CA), an age and gender stratified sample of 5,829 users was drawn from the entire population of United States eHarmony.com users between October 2002 and March 2012. Analyses focused on data from recent users ($N = 5,434$; 93% of the provided sample completed the questionnaire between January 2011 and March 2012).[2] This sample was 20 to 95 years old, 50% male,

86% non-Hispanic White, and 67% had an Associates or higher degree. Marital status and income distributions differed by age group; these additional demographics are provided in Supplementary Table 1.

Measures

Each new eHarmony.com online dating service user is required to complete a relationship questionnaire assessing individual differences (e.g., personal interests) and demographics.

Relationship goals—As part of the questionnaires, users were asked to "indicate how important each of the following characteristics would be to [them] in finding a partner for a relationship" across 30 items rated on a 7-point Likert scale from *not at all important* to *very important* (see Supplementary Table 2 for all items). We conducted a factor analysis on these items to empirically identify key themes of the assessed desires. Specifically, we conducted an exploratory factor analysis with a training sample of 1,000 users, and validated with a well-fitting confirmatory factor analysis on a validation sample of 4,434 users. Detailed procedures and results of the factor analyses are reported in the online supplement. Three meaningful factors were found. Composite scores were calculated by taking the mean of the factor items.

The *sexual attraction* factor had three items (Cronbach's $\alpha = .77$) about a partner's sex appeal and sexual compatibility. *Interpersonal communication* consisted of four items (Cronbach's $\alpha = .87$) that related to companionship and focused on desired interpersonal relationship characteristics (e.g., "Being able to easily talk about personal problems with my partner"). *Individual companionate characteristics* consisted of four items (Cronbach's $\alpha = .73$) also reflecting qualities related to companionship but described the desired partner specifically (e.g., "My partner's personality"). For additional item descriptive statistics, see Supplementary Table 4. Though we found two factors related to companionship, the analyses focus more on the interpersonal communication factor in order to highlight valued *relationship* qualities.

Independent variables and covariates—Demographics (e.g., gender, birth date, marital status) were collected; and two additional items, describing healthy appearance[3] and agreement with the statement "I am looking for a long-term relationship that will ultimately lead to marriage" (*absolutely disagree* = 1, *absolutely agree* = 7) were included as covariate proxies for self-reported health status and desire for short vs. long term relationships.

Data analysis

To test whether companionship was valued significantly more than sexual attraction, we compared the means of the composite scores using paired-samples t-tests. To test hypotheses about age and gender differences in absolute importance, we created regression models testing for effects of age, gender, and possible age by gender interactions. Age was centered

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[2]Earlier completion date (before 2011) was not associated with any outcomes, and analyses with the full sample have the same pattern of significance as the results presented in this manuscript.
[3]The item "healthy" was one adjective from a subscale asking "how well do the following words describe your physical appearance?" The item was scored on a 7-point Likert scale from *not at all* to *very well*.

(as indicated in Table 1) and rescaled to decades to facilitate interpretation. The composites were negatively skewed and exhibited ceiling effects, so we used censored regressions (Schnedler, 2005) which account for ceiling effects (see online supplement for additional information).

We first treated age as continuous and conducted analyses on the full age range. However, users' preferences can be influenced by specific life experiences that are partially confounded with age, particularly marital status (divorce, widowhood). Thus, to help minimize such confounds and clarify our understanding of age and gender differences over and above other demographic influences, we conducted analyses within age subgroups. We identified the independent effects of age and gender for "young" users under age 40, "middle age" users between 40 and 59 years old, "young-old" users age 60 to 74, and "old-old" users age 75 and above. Analyses on the full age range controlling for covariates are available in the supplement. To examine relative importance, we fit multiple regression models for the difference scores (e.g., subtracting importance of sexual attraction from the interpersonal communication score).

Finally, in order to avoid capitalizing on chance in a large data set, we randomly divided the full set into two samples; we tested models first in the training sample and re-tested model fit in the validation sample (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2001). The validation results were consistent. Additional details about adjusting estimates of effect size are available in the online supplement.

Results

Hypothesis 1: Identifying prioritized goals

We expected that users would value companionship more than sexual attraction. Indeed, overall users valued both interpersonal communication and individual companionate characteristics consistently more than sexual attraction, $t(2597) = 25.25$, $p < .001$, Cohen's $d = 0.50$ and $t(2597) = 30.73$, $p < .001$, Cohen's $d = 0.60$ respectively.[4]

Hypothesis 2: Age differences in relationship goals, and interactions with gender

We predicted that older users might value sexual attraction less than younger users (Hypothesis 2A). Across the full age range, we found a significant linear and curvilinear effect of age (see Table 1). The curvilinear age term suggested that middle aged users valued sexual attraction highly, and only the oldest users valued sexual attraction less than the youngest users. Among users age 20 to 39, although older age was significantly related to greater valuation of sexual attraction overall ($b = 0.30$, SE = 0.07, $p < .001$), when marital status was added as a covariate the age effect was attenuated. This was likely because there were more divorced users closer to middle age and divorced users valued sexual attraction more than never married users. Among the middle aged (age 40-59) users, older age was related to lower importance of sexual attraction over and above covariates (72.7% were divorced). In the older age groups (age 60-74 and 75+), there was no main effect of age.

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[4]Interpersonal companionate characteristics were valued slightly more than communication, $t(2597) = 4.73$, $p < .001$, but it was a small difference, Cohen's $d = 0.09$.

We also expected that older users might value companionship more than younger users (Hypothesis 2B). For importance of communication, in the lifespan sample there was a significant disordinal interaction. Among male users, the effect of age was not significant, b = 0.01, p = .46. For female users, the importance of communication was lower among older users, b = 0.05, p < .01. When covariates were included in the model for young users (age 20-39), a different significant age by gender interaction emerged. Male users a decade closer to 40 valued communication 0.40 units more than younger men; but for women, the effect of age was not significant, b = -0.02, SE = 0.12. There were no significant effects of age among middle age users or any of the older age subgroups. Age did not relate to importance of individual companionate characteristics in lifespan or age subgroup analyses. Thus, there is no consistent evidence that communication or companionate characteristics are valued more at older ages.

Hypothesis 3: Gender differences in importance of relationship goals

We predicted men would value sexual attraction more than women at all ages (Hypothesis 3A). Male users consistently valued sexual attraction more than women did in lifespan and age subgroup analyses (see Table 1 and Figure 1a). We also predicted women may value companionship more than men at all ages (Hypothesis 3B). A significant age × gender interaction in the lifespan sample identified larger gender differences in the importance of communication among younger users than among older users (Figure 1b). This pattern was driven by the young subgroup. While at age 20, female users were expected to value communication 0.56 units more than male users (SE = 0.16, p < .001), at age 39 the value of communication for male and female users was not significantly different, b = -0.23, SE = 0.16. There were no significant effects of gender among middle age users or the older subgroups. In contrast, women valued companionate characteristics more than men at all ages (Figure 1c).

We expected women at all ages to place even more emphasis on companionship versus sexual attraction compared to men (Hypothesis 3C). Indeed, the relative importance of communication compared to sexual attraction, and the importance of individual companionate characteristics compared to sexual attraction, was significantly higher for women than men at all ages. At age 50, women rated communication an additional 0.26 higher than sexual attraction compared to men (SE = 0.06, p < .001) and rated individual companionate characteristics an additional .52 higher than sexual attraction compared to men (SE = 0.05, p < .001).

Discussion

To our knowledge, this is the first quantitative study to examine what online dating users *across the lifespan* are looking for in a new relationship. Using a cross-sectional population sample of over 5,000 eHarmony.com users aged 20 to 95, we were able to examine gender and age differences across the lifespan in absolute and relative importance of both sexual attraction and companionship (via interpersonal communication and individual companionate characteristics). We found that users consistently valued communication and characteristics such as personality or kindness more than sexual attraction. We also found

mixed support for our predicted age differences across the lifespan. We had expected that older users would value sexual attraction less and companionship more than younger counterparts. There was little evidence that older users valued companionship more, but this may have been due to a ceiling effect. There was more evidence that users approaching age 60 and older valued sexual attraction less than younger users. However, there were no significant age differences among the users over 60, and they still valued sexual attraction highly ($M = 5.7$ out of 7). Overall, young-old and old-old users had similar preferences in this sample.

Our results are similar to the finding that across the lifespan, people generally want to experience more low arousal positive emotions (such as the warmth and comfort companionship provides) compared to high arousal positive emotions (such as the excitement associated with sexual attraction), especially among older adults compared to younger adults (Scheibe et al., 2013). However, the age difference in desire for sexual attraction appears for middle age users, while decreases in importance of high arousal positive emotion were not observed until over 80.

In all analyses, women placed a greater relative emphasis on companionship than men did. We replicated previous findings that men consistently value sexual attraction more than women across the lifespan and found the predicted gender differences in importance of individual companionate characteristics. However, importance of communication only differed by gender among the youngest users.

Little is known about how aging influences the experience and importance of different relationship goals; separating the effect of aging from the effect of past relationship experience and length is difficult (Miller & Perlman, 2009). By studying dating relationships, rather than older married couples, we can begin to study the influence of age separate from relationship duration. Comparing younger and older adults seeking a new relationship provides a more equivalent starting point than comparing long-time married couples to newlyweds. Older adults tend to have longer relationships, which in turn are associated with declining sexual, passionate and friendship-based, companionate love (Hatfield, Pillemer, O'Brien, & Le, 2008). In this lifespan sample of eHarmony users all looking to pursue a *new* relationship, the relative importance of sexual attraction was still lower in later life, and not as a function of relationship duration. However, this was a small effect; age and gender together accounted for approximately 5% of the total variance in importance of sexual attraction across the full age range.

Limitations & Future Directions

eHarmony users aim to receive matches close to their ideal, and therefore rate most characteristics as at least "somewhat important". With this restricted range, the real world significance of observed significant differences is unclear. Conversely, the lack of age differences in importance of companionship may be due to a ceiling effect. Future research could ask respondents to weigh the relative importance of sexual attraction and communication given real life trade-offs and look at how the ratings differ from the present study.

Finally, our interpretation is limited by the cross-sectional nature of the data and restricted generalizability. In addition to possible cohort effects, eHarmony users (and online daters generally) may not be representative of the single population at large. Younger eHarmony users may be especially marriage-minded and interested in companionship. Older online dating users may be particularly interested in sexual attraction, as sexual desire may motivate active pursuit of new romantic relationships. In this sample, the 60 to 79 year old users' preferences were rather homogeneous but this could be a selection effect; older adults in the general population may have more varied preferences and differ more by age.

Despite these limitations, the study also has notable strengths. Previous studies have often interviewed people who were already in a dating relationship or were just considering whether to date. Our approach was to use eHarmony user data, with participants actively seeking new romantic relationships. The large sample of eHarmony participants is also an important advantage over previous work using small convenience samples of community-dwelling older adults. Although it is unclear how eHarmony users might differ from the general population, the data set is still ecologically valid for interpretation of the general population of eHarmony users and potentially other individuals who use online dating services.

The present study also builds on previous online dating work by collecting quantitative data from all users, allowing comparisons of the *relative* importance of companionship and sexual attraction. Previous work could not do this because participants did not have to report on all goals of interest (Alterovitz & Mendelsohn, 2013), or participants were asked to rank goals without indicating the magnitude of the prioritization (Montenegro, 2003). This is also the first study of relationship goals in online dating with an extensive age range and sufficient sample size in each age group to allow comparisons across the entire lifespan.

As the population continues to age, there will be many single, older adults seeking relationships. Thus, an accurate understanding of relationship goals, the importance placed on different types of goals, and how those goals are different or *similar* from younger counterparts have important consequences for formal (online and in-person dating services) and informal matchmakers (acquaintances, friends, co-workers, family members). Contrary to the stereotype, older adults still value sexual attraction quite highly, though age differences do exist. Learning more about older adults' relational goals is an exciting and important first step toward understanding the processes that lead to strong relationships in later life.

Supplementary Material

Refer to Web version on PubMed Central for supplementary material.

Acknowledgments

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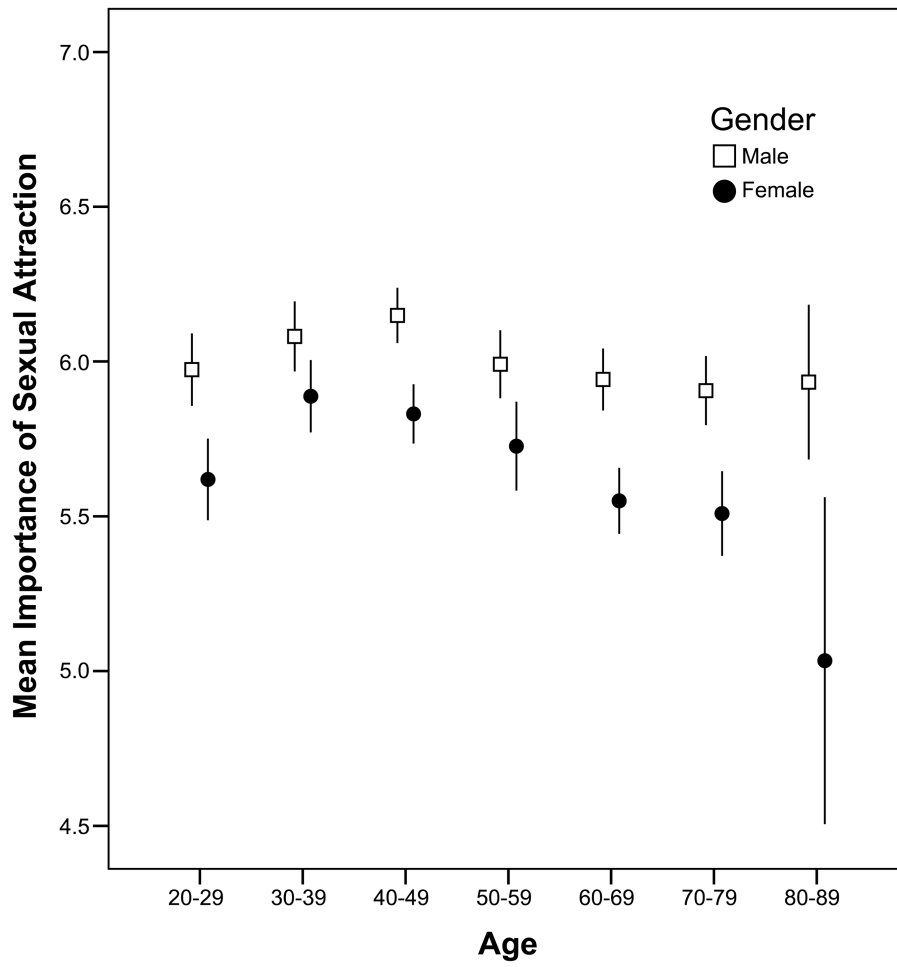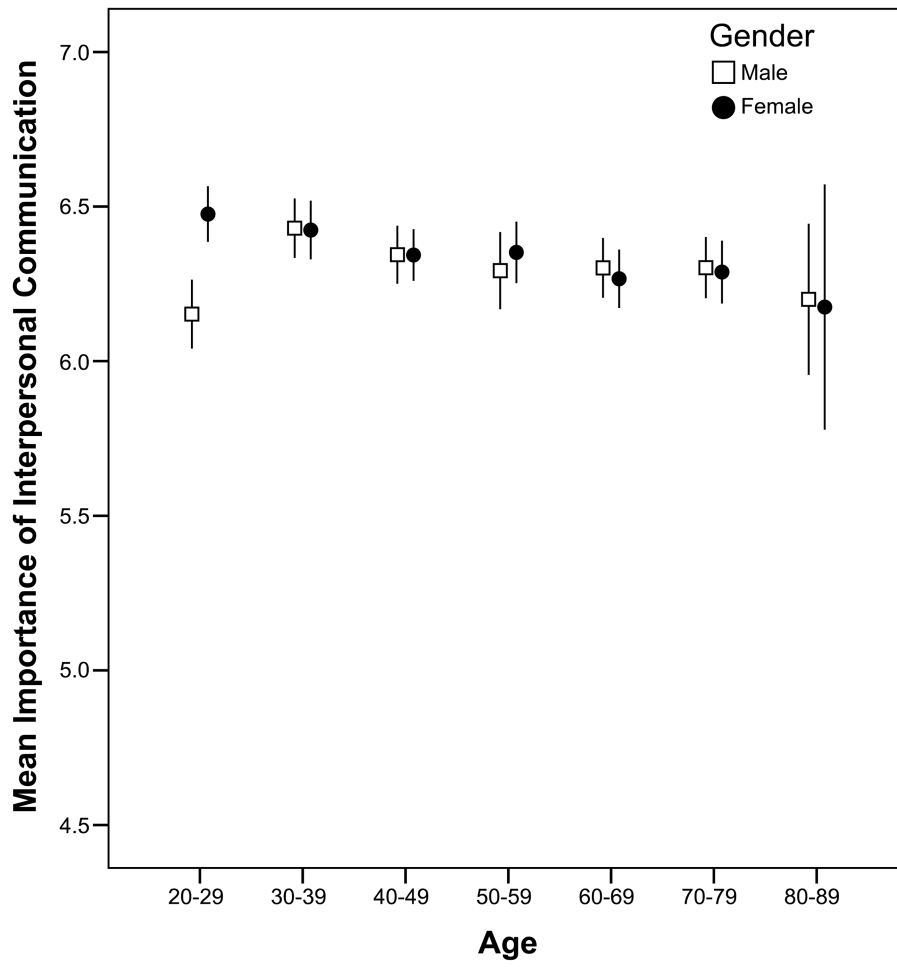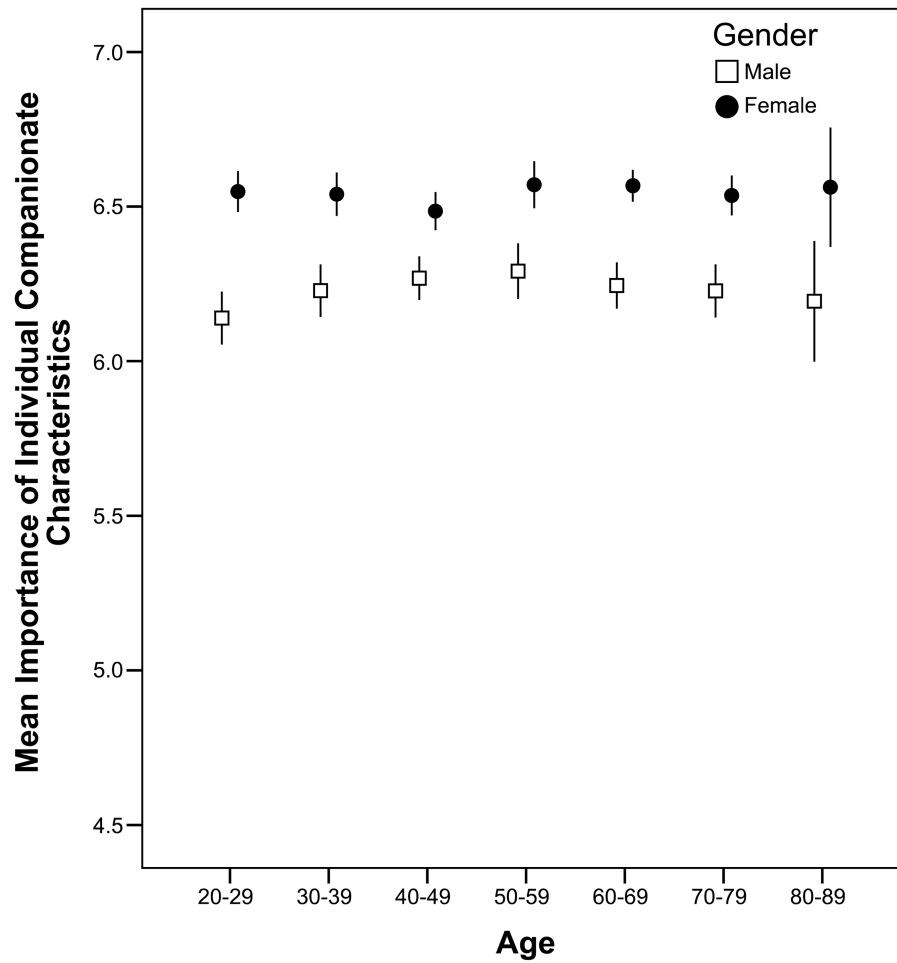
Figure 1.
Actual mean composite scores split by age and gender for training sample. Error bars
represent 95% confidence intervals around the means.
a) Importance of sexual attraction
b) Importance of interpersonal communication
c) Importance of individual companionate characteristics

Table 1

Unstandardized Betas and Standard Errors from Regression Analyses by Age Groups

Outcome	Predictor	Age				
		20-91 (Centered at 50, N = 2598)	20-39 (Centered at 30, N = 780)	40-59 (Centered at 50, N = 785)	60-74 (Centered at 67, N = 825)	75+ (Centered at 80, N = 178)
Sexual Attraction	Intercept	6.22 (0.04)***	5.53 (0.29)***	4.93 (0.22)***	4.49 (0.21)***	5.02 (0.43)***
	Age	-0.04 (0.01)***	0.18 (0.09)*	-0.26 (0.06)***	0.06 (0.11)	-0.04 (0.21)
	Gender	-0.40 (0.04)***	-0.29 (0.07)***	-0.32 (0.06)***	-0.40 (0.07)***	-0.47 (0.15)**
	Age²	-0.03 (0.01)***				
Interpersonal Communication	Intercept	6.53 (0.03)***	4.42 (0.30)***	5.44 (0.26)***	5.36 (0.25)***	6.07 (0.48)***
	Age	0.01 (0.02)	0.40 (0.11)***	-0.10 (0.07)	0.13 (0.13)	0.05 (0.25)
	Gender	0.05 (0.04)	0.14 (0.08)†	-0.01 (0.07)	0.00 (0.08)	0.11 (0.18)
	Age × Gender	-0.06 (0.02)**	-0.42 (0.15)**			
Individual Companionate Characteristics	Intercept	6.29 (0.02)***	5.05 (0.21)***	5.53 (0.17)***	5.66 (0.16)***	5.69 (0.32)***
	Age	0.01 (0.01)	0.03 (0.06)	-0.02 (0.06)	0.04 (0.08)	0.10 (0.16)
	Gender	0.40 (0.03)***	0.43 (0.05)***	0.31 (0.05)***	0.41 (0.05)***	0.55 (0.12)***

Note. The life-span model does not include covariates. Overall, age and gender accounted for 5.4% of the total variance in importance of sexual attraction, and 7.6 to 8.2% of the variance in the importance of individual companionate characteristics, but only 1% or less of the variance in interpersonal communication. The age subgroup results are from models also including marital status, ethnicity, income, education, and proxies for self-reported health and desire for a long term relationship/marriage in the training sample. Age was centered and was entered in the model in decades (centered age/10). Gender was coded with males as the comparison group.

†
p < .10

*
p < .05,

**
p < .01,

***
p < .001