Discrepancies between self report and behavior in college women: Is there truth to the “nice guy paradox?”

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Introduction

In pop culture and literature many women are perceived to report that they are attracted to “nice guy” characteristics but they subsequently exhibit contradicting behaviors by choosing the “macho guy” as their dating partner.

The nice guy paradox can be defined as a phenomenon in which women portray themselves as wanting to date kind, sensitive, and emotionally expressive men, but when actually presented with a choice between this “nice guy” and an unkind, insensitive, emotionally closed, “macho guy,” they reject the nice guy in favor of the more macho guy.

Literature

Many factors have been shown to play a role in female mate selection

  - Feminist women value resource acquisition potential less
- Age Tadinac and Hromatko (2004)
- Involvement level Buss et al. (1992), Townsend and Levy (1980)
- Biological factors (menstrual cycle) Gangestad et al. (2007)
Animal literature supports the importance of dominance and strength as mate selection (breeding) factors (Berglund, Bisazza, & Pilastro, 1996).

Women may be programmed (innate) to be attracted to characteristics that increase the probability of survival of their offspring (Trivers, 1972).

Dominant males more attractive to women in most fertile stages of menstrual cycle. (Johnston, Hagel, Franklin, Fink, & Grammer, 2001; Gangestad, Simpson, Cousins, Garver-Apgar, & Christensen, 2004; Puts, 2005; Thornhill & Gangestad, 1999).

Previous research has found discrepancies between self-reported mate preferences and actual judgments in women.
- Wiederman and Dubois (1998)
- Sprecher (1989)
- Hadjistavropoulos and Genest (1994)

“Nice guy” studies
- Urbaniak and Kilmann (2003) conducted two studies and results from both indicate that women chose to date the “nice guy” more often and found him more desirable.
- Urbaniak and Kilmann (2006) found that a male’s success in casual dating relationships and one-time sexual encounters was negatively associated with their agreeableness.

Bogaert and Fisher (1995) found that sensation seeking, hypermasculine sex role, positive sexual affect, psychoticism, dominance, physical attractiveness, and testosterone were all positively correlated with the men’s number of sexual partners in their lifetime. Also, intimacy, defined as the ability to form close relationships, was negatively correlated with number of sexual partners across their lifetime.

Herold and Milhausen (1999) found that 18% of the participants chose the macho guy over the nice guy (in their lifetime) but 56% of participants reported that they knew of women who had chosen a more sexually experienced macho guy over an inexperienced nice guy.
Maybach and Gold (1994) found that women who scored lower on a measure of hyperfemininity were less attracted to the macho man and chose him less as a husband and sexual partner.

They also reported that the macho man did not resemble their past or current boyfriends.

They reported less attraction to the man in the nonconsensual sexual scenario compared to women high in hyperfemininity.

Cognitively, women identify being attracted to more sensitive, emotional characteristics in potential male partners.

These might conflict with more instinctual, evolutionarily pre-programmed preferences.

Thus they state a preference for the “nice” guy, but are drawn to the “macho” guy.

In this study, the cognitive factor is indexed by a self-report adjective checklist representing both “nice” and “macho” characteristics (LIST).

The “gut reaction” (innate) factor is assessed using a vignette measure depicting each of the adjectives represented in the adjective checklist (VIG).

Hypothesis 1: Female participants will endorse nice-guy characteristics more strongly on the cognitive report measure (LIST) than on the reaction measure (VIG) (LISTN>VIGN) and will endorse macho characteristics more strongly on the VIG measure than on the LIST measure (VIGM>LISMT).
Hypotheses

- Hypothesis 2: Female participants’ ratings of their actual partners on the BSRI will correspond more closely to their ratings on the VIG measure than to their ratings on the LIST measure. That is, they will be more likely to date according to their “gut reaction” than to their cognitive appraisal of their desires.

Research Questions

- Does hyperfemininity influence responses on the LIST and VIG measures?
- Does level of social desirability influence responses on the LIST and VIG measures?

Method

Participants
- Originally 426 participants with 95.1% reporting that they were heterosexual and 95.5% reporting that they had been in a romantic relationship in the past year.
- Those who were not heterosexual and/or had not been in a relationship in the past year were removed from the sample leaving 387 participants.

Method
- Participants ranged in age from 18 to 38 years (M = 18.86, SD = 1.77). Approximately 90% of participants were first or second year undergraduates.
- 67.4% Non-Hispanic White/Caucasian, 18.9% African American, 6.2% Hispanic American/Latino, 3.6% Asian American, 2.1% Bi-racial, and 1.1% were from other racial/ethnic groups.
Method

**Measures**
- Demographics
  - Included questions regarding age, race, religion, and income. Additionally, the questionnaire inquired about current and past relationships and sexual orientation in order to check that each participant identified as heterosexual and had been in at least one romantic relationship.

**Characteristics (LIST)**
- Created for this study and includes a list of 19 characteristics that have been used in previous literature to describe a dating partner.
- Some of the characteristics describe a “nice guy” (LIST\(\text{N}\)) while others describe a “macho guy” (LIST\(\text{M}\)).
- For each characteristic there is a 10 point likert scale ranging from 1 (not attractive) to 10 (very attractive) where the participants can rate how attractive they find each characteristic.
- The internal consistency of the items was .74 and .72 for the “nice guy” (LIST\(\text{N}\)) and “macho guy” (LIST\(\text{M}\)) items, respectively.

**LIST and VIG Development**
- Prior to the study the LIST and VIG measures were examined more closely to ensure that the measures corresponded item by item.
- 40 female and 25 male undergraduate students from an advanced psychology class participated.
- The questionnaire included 20 vignettes with several characteristics listed below each vignette. The participants were instructed to choose which characteristic best matched each vignette, or to write a characteristic in if they felt that the best option was not listed.

**Vignettes (VIG)**
- Created for this study and includes 19 short paragraphs describing situations in which the male in the vignette engages in a behavior. Each vignette includes a behavior that maps on to one of the characteristics from the LIST measure.
- Each vignette is rated on a 10 point likert scale ranging from 1 (not attractive) to 10 (very attractive), reflecting the participants’ level of attraction to the male that is described.
- The vignettes do not include any information regarding the age, race, or appearance of the males so as not to distract from the specific behaviors and other characteristics of the males or stimulate an association to a known partner.
- The internal consistency of the items was .69 and .58 for the “nice guy” (VIG\(\text{N}\)) and “macho guy” (VIG\(\text{M}\)) items, respectively.
Method

- A frequency table was obtained for each of the vignettes which displayed the percentage of participants that endorsed each of the corresponding characteristics.
- The vignettes that were retained had to have a majority of participants (50 percent or greater) endorse the hypothesized characteristic.

Method

- Of the 20 vignettes, 14 met these criteria and were retained for the final measure.
- The six vignettes that did not meet these criteria were then revised and presented to the participants again.
- Frequency tables for each of the six vignettes were obtained and, using the criteria described previously, five of the six vignettes were retained.

Method

- Hyperfemininity Inventory (HFI)
  - Designed by Murnen and Byrne (1991) to measure adherence to a traditional feminine gender role.
  - It is a 26-item forced choice scale which includes items such as, “I like to play hard-to-get” versus “I don’t like to play games in a relationship.”
  - Murnen and Byrne (1991) reported that the internal consistency in the scale in the initial sample was .76 but in subsequent samples it was in the low .80's.
  - In the present study the internal consistency was .60.

Method

- Marlowe-Crowne Social Desirability Scale (MCSD; Crowne and Marlowe, 1960)
  - Focuses on typical personal and interpersonal behaviors
  - Respondents will be asked to answer true or false to questions that exaggerate an individual’s good qualities
  - Total scores will be calculated by assigning 1 point to each "socially desirable" answer.
  - The MCSD has good psychometric properties with a reported alpha of .88 (Barger, 2002).
  - The internal consistency in the present study was .76.
Method

- Adapted version of the Bem Sex Role Inventory (BSRI; Bem, 1974)
  - 60-item measure that yields scores on two dimensions, masculinity and femininity.
  - Each item is a word or phrase that is rated on a 7 point scale from 1 (never or almost never true) to 7 (always or almost always true).
  - BSRI is typically used as a self report measure but for purposes of this study the directions were slightly altered so that participants completed the measure based on their current (or most recent) partner, rather than themselves.
  - According to Bem (1974) the psychometrics of the BSRI are good with alpha of .80 to .82 on the feminine scale and .86 on the masculine scale.
  - The internal consistency in the present study was .81 for the feminine scale and .72 for the masculine scale.

Procedure

- PSPM recruitment of participants from 102 pool
- Groups of 30-40 at a time in a classroom setting
- Informed consent was completed at arrival
- First three measures were administered
  - Demographics
  - LIST or VIG (in counterbalanced order)
  - HFI
- When first three measures were completed they were collected and the last three were administered
  - LIST or VIG (whichever was not completed previously)
  - MCSD
  - BSRI
- Participants were asked to fill out measures in order without looking ahead
- After all questionnaires were completed participants were debriefed and given credit for their participation

Results

- Hypothesis 1: Female participants will endorse nice-guy characteristics more strongly on the cognitive report measure (LIST) than on the reaction measure (VIG) (LISTN>VIGN) and will endorse macho characteristics more strongly on the VIG measure than on the LIST measure (VIGM>LSTM).
Results

- Each participant’s responses on the “nice guy” and “macho guy” questions from the LIST measure were averaged to develop mean “nice guy” and “macho guy” scores, respectively. The same was done with the “nice guy” and “macho guy” items on the VIG measure.

- A repeated measures ANOVA was conducted including type of male as the within subjects factor, with two levels, (macho and nice) and type of measure (LIST and VIG) as the between subjects factor.

- As predicted, participants endorsed nice-guy characteristics more strongly on the LIST measure (M=59.47, SD=7.66) than on the VIG measure (M=54.91, SD=8.33) and macho-guy characteristics more strongly on the VIG measure (M=42.05, SD=10.02) than on the LIST measure (M=33.40, SD=9.93).

- The differences between measures were significant, F(1, 765) = 198.03, p < .001.

Results

- Hypothesis 2: Female participants’ ratings of their actual partners on the BSRI will correspond more closely to their ratings on the VIG measure than to their ratings on the LIST measure. That is, they will be more likely to date according to their “gut reaction” than to their cognitive appraisal of their desires.

- Step One
  - Participants were categorized into one of two groups, masculine or feminine, based on their BSRI responses.
  - The data from the LIST and VIG measure were also used to place participants into a masculine or feminine groups.
  - A median split was performed on the “nice guy” and “macho guy” responses to determine high and low scores for each.

- Step two
  - Two chi square analyses were conducted, one with the LIST measure data and the other with the VIG measure data and the BSRI data.
The results of the chi-square statistics indicated significant relationships between the LIST and BSRI measures $\chi^2 (1, N = 98) = 7.56, p = .006$ and the VIG and BSRI measures $\chi^2 (1, N = 92) = 4.37, p = .037$, indicating that female participants’ ratings of their actual partners on the BSRI did not correspond more closely to the VIG than the LIST measure.

Research questions one and two

- Does hyperfemininity (high versus low) influence responses on the LIST and VIG measures?
- Does level of social desirability (high versus low) influence responses on the LIST and VIG measures?

A regression analysis was conducted with each of the average macho and nice scores from the measures (VIG and LIST) as the dependent variable and the HFI and the MCSD as the independent variables.

The regression results indicated that the HFI, but not the MCSD, significantly predicted the average macho and nice scores on both the VIG and LIST measures.

There is a positive relationship between the HFI and the “macho” average scores and a negative relationship between the HFI and the “nice” average scores.
### Results

#### Coefficients for Regression Models

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<th>p</th>
<th>significance</th>
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<td>HFI (LISTN)</td>
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Note: * Indicates significance at p<.05, ** indicates significance at p<.01 and *** indicates significance at p<.001.

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Note: * Indicates significance at p<.05, ** indicates significance at p<.01 and *** indicates significance at p<.001.

### Discussion

- The first hypothesis was that female participants would be more likely to say that they are attracted to sensitive, pro-social characteristics in men, but that they would respond differently when presented with depictions of men exemplifying these characteristics and behaviors. Similarly, although they would be less likely to admit attraction to the more negative, aggressive characteristics and behaviors, they would admit attraction when presented with vignettes depicting men in these ways.

- The results from the present study fully supported this hypothesis, indicating that participants did endorse nice-guy characteristics more strongly on the LIST measure as compared to the VIG measure, while endorsing macho-guy characteristics more strongly on the VIG measure than on the LIST measure. These results are consistent with the “nice-guy paradox.”
Consistent with the evolutionary literature which suggests that women in general are pre-programmed to be attracted to dominant characteristics in a potential mate (Sadalla et al., 1987, Jensen-Campbell et al., 1995, Burger and Cosby, 1999, Kenrick et al., 1994).

These results are also consistent with the findings of Wiederman and Dubois (1998) and Sprecher (1989).

Hypothesis two stated that participants’ ratings of their actual partners on the BSRI would correspond more closely to their ratings on the VIG measure than to their ratings on the LIST measure.

The results of this study did not support this hypothesis. The BSRI was significantly related to participant’s responses on both the LIST and VIG measures.

The LIST and BSRI are both lists of adjectives and it is possible that shared method variance contributes to the significant relationship between these measures, rather than reflecting a true relationship.

The significant relationship between the BSRI and the VIG measures in spite of the fact that they do not share the same structural format supports the validity of the VIG method as an accurate report of the characteristics that women are attracted to in practice.

The results of the current study indicated that the higher the participants’ level of hyperfemininity the more likely they were to endorse being attracted to macho-guy characteristics and the less likely they were to endorse being attracted to nice-guy characteristics. This was found on both the LIST and VIG measures.
Discussion

• The second research question was related to the possible influence of social desirability on the LIST and VIG measures. The results indicated that participants’ responses on the LIST and VIG measures were not affected by social desirability.

Limitations

• Did not include actual partners
• Shared method variance between LIST and BSRI
• LIST and VIG have not been validated
• Looked only at heterosexual college women

Clinical Implications/Future Directions

• How might this relate to IPV?
  • First, the macho characteristics map on to the characteristics attributed to batterers.
  • Although generally considered negative, there is apparently an attraction to these for many women.
  • Secondly, men might be getting mixed messages from their female partners, leading to
  • Masculine Gender Role Strain (MGRS)
    o Increase anger, anxiety, alcohol abuse, and violence

Clinical Implications/Future Directions

• Suggests the importance of looking at mate preferences and mate selection in understanding how abusive relationships form and why revictimization may occur
• Hyperfeminine women
  o May be especially attracted to characteristics that are prevalent in an abusive population, and
  o More tolerant of adversarial sexual behavior