Men, Sex, and Risk: Turning Up the Heat on Men’S Financial Decisions

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Do sexual cues lead men to prefer more or less financial risk? We find that sexual cues produce financial risk-aversion, leading men to take a bird in the hand rather than two birds in the bush. Sex causes men to prefer certain (but smaller) gains over uncertain (but larger) gains.

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between receiving $37 tomorrow versus $54 in 33 days. Findings showed that sex ratio had no effect on women’s intertemporal choice. For men, however, sex ratio produced a large effect. As predicted, a male-biased ratio led men to opt for immediate financial rewards when compared to either a female-biased or an even sex ratio. This means that as women become scarce, men desired immediate monetary rewards.

In Experiment 2 participants read news articles describing the local population as either male-biased or female-biased. Participants then indicated how much money they would save each month from a paycheck, as well as how much money they would borrow each month for immediate expenditures. Findings showed that sex ratio again had no effect on women’s financial desires. However, male-biased sex ratios led men to save less money, cutting their monthly savings by 42%. Male-biased sex ratios also led men to want to borrow 84% more money for use toward immediate expenditures.

Whereas the first two experiments examined how sex ratio influenced the desire to acquire immediate monetary resources, the third experiment investigated whether sex ratio has parallel influences on how monetary resources are spent. Recall that in both human and non-human animals, male-biased sex ratios are associated with increased investment by males in mating effort. Thus, if men value immediate financial yields under male-biased sex-ratios as a means of attracting mates, then men should be expected to spend more on mating-related expenditures when the sex ratio is male-biased.

Experiment 3 examined how sex ratio influenced the amount of money people expected men to pay for three mating-related expenditures: a romantic Valentine’s Day gift, an entrée for a dinner date, and an engagement ring. Because females become choosier and males invest more in mating effort under a male-biased sex ratio, we predicted that men would be expected to pay more for the same mating-related expenditures when women were scarce. Supporting predictions, findings showed that when the sex ratio was male-biased, men were expected to pay $6.01 more for a Valentine’s Day gift, pay $1.51 more for an entrée on a dinner date, and pay $278 more for an engagement ring.

Our findings highlight people’s sensitivity to a particular feature of the social environment—the ratio of adult men to women. Just as sex ratio has important effects on animal behavior, we find that sex ratio has theoretically consistent effects on human behavior. However, the effects of sex ratio on humans are not limited to the traditional domains of study, which include mating, parenting, and aggression. Instead, sex ratio also appears to influence other life domains that may be even more relevant to daily behavior.

REFERENCES

**Men, Sex, and Risk: Turning Up the Heat on Men’s Financial Decisions**

**EXTENDED ABSTRACT**

In this research we address a basic question: Do sexual cues lead men to prefer more financial risk or less financial risk? For example, does interacting with an alluring woman—or merely seeing an ad with a sexy model—lead men to be safer with their money or to gamble? At first glance, the answer to this question might appear obvious. Not only do sexual cues lead to impulsivity (Van den Bergh, Dewitte and Warlop 2008), but sexual arousal has been linked to risk-proneness. For instance, sexually aroused men report a greater willingness to engage in risky sexual activities (Ariely and Loewenstein 2006), and exposure to images of nude Playboy models leads men to be more willing to behave in a sexually forceful manner (Loewenstein, Nagin and Paternoster 1997).

Drawing on research on how decision-making is influenced by cold and hot psychological systems (Metcalfe and Mischel 1999), we propose that sexual cues produce a tendency to maximize the probability of monetary rewards. When the cold, cognitive system is compromised (e.g., people are unable to deliberate), people prefer smaller, certain rewards over larger, risky rewards (Whitney, Rinehart, and Hinson 2008). We hypothesize that activating the hot spots of the affective system, rather than overloading the cool nodes of the cognitive system, leads to financial risk-aversion. We therefore predict that sexual cues should not lead men to become more financially risky, but instead, cause them to become financially risk-averse.

In Experiment 1 we manipulated sex cues by having the same female research assistant wear either plain/unrevealing attire or wearing revealing/sexy attire. Participants then made a series of financial choices between safe (certain) vs. risky (uncertain) financial options. For example, do you prefer to: Receive $70 for sure or 50% to receive $200. Findings showed that men chose the certain option more often after exposure to a research assistant in sexy clothing than after exposure to the same research assistant in plain clothing.

The next study extended these findings by examining a key individual difference moderator. We hypothesize that sexual cues lead men to choose certain options because sexual cues activate a general reward-seeking system that seeks immediate gratification. If so, we predicted that the effects of sex cues should be strongest for men who have a sensitive reward system. In Experiment 2 sex cues were manipulated by having male participants inspect and touch either a T-shirt or lingerie. Then, participant engaged in a probability discounting task, allowing us to assess preferences for financial risk. The sensitivity of the general reward-seeking system was assessed via an established individual difference measure (Torrubia et al. 2001). Findings again showed that sexual cues led to a preference for smaller, certain rewards over larger, uncertain rewards. In addition, this effect was moderated by the sensitivity of people’s reward system. As predicted, the effect was most pronounced among men with a sensitive reward system, but become weaker for men with a less sensitive reward system.

We hypothesize that sexual cues should produce a desire to maximize the probability of monetary rewards. This means that the sexual system should play a critical role in evaluating certain rewards but less so in evaluating merely probable rewards. In Experiment 3, sexual cues were manipulated by having male participants...
view photos of women who were either wearing unrevealing clothing or wearing a swimsuit/lingerie. Participants then engaged in a probability discounting task that included a safe and a risky prospect. Findings showed that exposure to bikini models led to a higher valuation of smaller monetary rewards in the certain condition, but not in the risky condition. That is, sexual cues instigate risk aversion only when a sure prospect could be obtained.

Using varied methodologies to enhance validity and generalizability, in three experiments we found that sex cues led men to be financially risk-averse. In addition, we tested two key moderators of this predicted effect that provide insight into the underlying mechanism. This research not only shows how, why, and when sexual cues influence risky financial decisions, but it also contributes to a growing body of research documenting that a desire for a reward in one domain (e.g., sex) influences decisions about rewards in other domains (e.g., money).

REFERENCES


Women, Sex, and Risk: Mating Motivation and Financial Risk-Taking in Women

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Little is known about how mating cues influence women’s behavior. The current research examined how mating cues affect women’s financial risk-taking. There is little reason to believe that mating cues by themselves will influence women’s preferences for risk. Indeed, mating cues seldom influence female choice patterns (e.g., Wilson and Daly 2004; Roney 2003). Nevertheless, to the extent that financial decisions may function to alter others’ perceptions, underlying psychological systems regulating financial decision-making may be sensitive to the presence of others ( Bateson et al. 2006; Burnham and Hare 2007; Haley and Fessler 2005). The lack of effects of mating cues on female choice in prior research may therefore stem from failing to take into account potential audience effects. The present research addresses this shortcoming by taking into account both mating motivation and audience effects among female decision-makers.

In Study 1, mating cues were manipulated by having participants read a guided visualization scenarios designed to elicit either a mating motivation or no motivation. Then, participants were assigned to one of two audience conditions. Those in the no-audience condition were told they were randomly selected not to share their answers with anyone and were reminded that their answers would be completely anonymous. Participants in the audience condition were told they were randomly selected to share their answers with two men and two women completing the same study in other rooms in the lab. Participants then made three decisions, choosing for each a sure gain (e.g., $10 for sure) or a chance of gaining more money accompanied by a risk of gaining nothing (e.g., a 90% chance of getting $15 and a 10% chance of getting nothing). Findings showed that a mating motivation did not influence women’s risk when choices were anonymous. However, women became riskier in the mating condition when they thought they were going to be sharing their answers with an audience.

Because the audience condition in Study 1 involved a mixed sex audience, it is not clear for whom the participants were displaying riskiness. That is, women could have been displaying their riskiness to members of their own sex. Or, women could have been displaying riskiness to members of the opposite sex. Alternatively, it is possible that women only engage in financial risk-taking when both potential mates and competitors are present.

In Study 2, we aimed to explore this question by employing a more comprehensive array of possible audience compositions. The mating motive manipulations were the same as in Study 1 (mating versus control scenarios), but four audience manipulations were included. In the no-audience condition, participants were told their answers would be completely anonymous. In the all-female condition, participants were told they would be sharing their answers with four women. In the all-male condition, participants were told they would be sharing their answers with four men. And in the mixed-sex condition, participants were told they would be sharing their answers with two men and two women. Financial risk-taking was measured using the same items as in Study 1. Results revealed that there was only one condition in which mating motives led women to take more financial risks – when they were in the presence of a mixed-sex audience.

Taken together, these studies reveal that a mating motivation by itself did not influence women’s financial risk preferences. However, a mating cue in conjunction with an audience did lead women to take more financial risks. The second study revealed that an all-male or all-female audience does not appear to elicit more risk. Instead, in both studies it was only when a mixed-sex audience was introduced that women took more risks. Therefore, the present findings suggest that two distinct processes might be driving female financial decision making: Intrasexual selection and intersexual selection. Intrasexual selection involves competition between members of the same sex for mating access to members of the opposite sex. Intersexual selection, in contrast, involves preferential choice exerted by members of one sex for members of the opposite sex. Mating motivation increased the willingness to take financial risks only when female rivals could be outdone (intrasexual selection), and at the same time mates could be secured (intersexual selection). If one of these conditions is not met (e.g., rivals cannot be outdone or opposite sex individuals are not around), women appear to adopt a risk-avoidant strategy and do not experience a need to engage in financial risk seeking.