Possible Selves in Marital Roles: The Impact of the Anticipated Division of Labor on the Mate Preferences of Women and Men

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In two experiments, female and male participants envisioned themselves as a married person with children who is either a homemaker or a provider. Participants who envisioned themselves as a future homemaker regarded a potential mate's provider qualities as more important and homemaker qualities as less important, compared with participants who envisioned themselves as a future provider. Envisioning oneself as a homemaker also shifted preferences toward an older spouse, compared with envisioning oneself as a provider. In the control conditions of the experiments, in which participants freely envisioned their own future marriage, the less provider responsibility anticipated for the wife, the more traditional were mate preferences. These experiments support the social role theory view that the roles anticipated by men and women influence their choice of mates.

Keywords: social roles; mate preferences; the self; sex differences; gender

How do people choose mates? Preferences for partners who offer particular skills or traits emerge interactively from humans' evolved characteristics, individuals' developmental experiences, and their situated activity in society. Partners' skills and traits gain meaning within the circumstances that people encounter in their culture and in their personal lives. This meaning takes the form of costs and benefits that are expected to follow from choosing particular types of mates (Wood & Eagly, 2007). In this article, we report novel experimental and correlational tests of the extent to which expectations about future marital roles affect preferences for mates.

Our predictions follow from the assumption that people desire a mate who will enable them to minimize the costs and maximize the benefits associated with their own anticipated life outcomes. Beliefs about these costs and benefits are socially transmitted and shared within cultures (Richerson & Boyd, 2005). Because men's and women's lives are organized by social roles, they anticipate the outcomes of mating choices through envisioning their future roles, thereby fostering different types of mating relationships and partners (Eagly & Wood, 1999; Eagly, Wood, & Johannesen-Schmidt, 2004; Wood & Eagly, 2002, 2007).

Anticipated marital roles are especially likely to affect choices of long-term mates. We focus on a key feature of marital roles: the division of labor between responsibility for providing resources and carrying out domestic work. Traditionally in industrialized societies, a strong societal consensus about this division dictated a marital exchange between women's domestic labor and men's wage labor (e.g., Kalmijn, 1998). However, under contemporary conditions of weakened societal consensus about this arrangement, personal expectations for marital roles should be important.

Those who anticipate staying home to raise children figure out that they will benefit from a partner who can pay the bills and will incur costs if both partners are exclusively devoted to domestic activities. Those who anticipate extreme dedication to their work outside the home figure out that they will benefit from a partner who can competently perform domestic work and will incur costs if both partners are exclusively devoted to employment activities. In short, the proposition that we develop in this article is that such expectations about future marital roles influence preferences for long-term mates. The current research tests these principles by experimentally manipulating future marital roles and by correlating individual differences in these anticipated roles with mate preferences.

This theory helps explain typical sex differences in mate preferences observed in earlier research (e.g., Buss, 1989; Eagly & Wood, 1999). With the conventional arrangement of male providers and female homemakers, women generally maximize their outcomes by seeking a mate likely to be successful in the wage-earning role—that is, a good provider. In turn, men generally maximize their outcomes by seeking a mate likely to be successful in the domestic role—that is, a competent child caretaker and household worker.

This homemaker-provider marital structure likely also underlies the typical preferences of women for older husbands and of men for younger wives (e.g., Kenrick & Keefe, 1992). The combination of an older provider husband and younger homemaker wife solidifies the patriarchal power inequality of marriages in societies characterized by such gender disparities. In addition, younger women tend to lack their own resources and therefore are more likely than older women to desire the resources of a successful provider. In complementary fashion, older men have commonly acquired resources and status that make them good candidates for a provider role that can support a wife who is freed from breadwinning to specialize in the domestic sphere. The resulting marriages between older men and younger women facilitate the provider-homemaker marital form and the female subordination that is inherent in it (e.g., Epstein, 2007).

In essence, the preferences that people have for their long-term mates are not random but are influenced by the marital arrangements that prevail in their society. When a particular form of marriage is common, preferences congruent with it become consensual and therefore embedded in societies' gender roles and cultural ideology. Consequently, men and women are expected to possess the characteristics that equip them for the marital roles that are typical of their sex. For example, to the extent that childrearing is the responsibility of women, they would be expected to be nurturing and kind, regardless of whether they are mothers. These

gender roles, along with typical marital roles, then guide preferences for types of mates and relationships. Nonetheless, despite the power of culture to shape mate preferences, variability in these preferences is present within each sex. This variability may reflect personal gender ideology as well as individuals' specific expectations about the division of labor in their own future marriage.

EMPIRICAL EVIDENCE RELEVANT TO SOCIAL ROLE THEORY OF MATE PREFERENCES

How might this social role theory of mate preferences be tested? If societal and individual variation in marital roles and gender roles were appropriately associated with the types of characteristics desired in mates, such evidence would offer support for this social-role account of mate preferences. Such tests have been arranged with various methods.

Variation Across Cultures

Because marital roles vary across contemporary societies, one type of test examined cross-cultural variation in mate preferences. Specifically, reanalyses of the mate selection data of Buss's (1989) 37-cultures study related men's and women's reports of mate preferences to societal-level indicators of the extent of gender equality in those countries (Eagly & Wood, 1999). As expected, to the extent that these societies were patriarchal—that is, characterized by inequality between the sexes—women tended to prefer mates who are older and possess resources, and men tended to prefer mates who are younger and have housekeeping and cooking skills (see Kasser & Sharma, 1999, for related findings). Providing additional evidence that these preferences were a common response to social structural factors, the sex differences in mate preferences tended to coexist within societies; those societies in which women expressed especially strong preferences for mates with resources and for older mates were also those in which men expressed especially strong preferences for mates with domestic skills and for younger mates (Eagly & Wood, 1999; for discussion of these findings, see Gangestad, Haselton, & Buss, 2006, and response by Eagly & Wood, 2006).

Variation Across Years

Variation of mate preferences across time periods is important because the domestic and employment roles of women and men have become more similar in recent decades in industrialized nations (e.g., Bianchi, Robinson, & Milkie, 2006), likely producing some convergence in female and male preferences for long-term

mates. Much more than in the past, wives share bread-winning responsibility with their husbands, and husbands share domestic responsibility with their wives. The wage gap has decreased substantially (Blau & Kahn, 2007), and in about one fourth of marriages in which both spouses are employed, the wife earns more than the husband (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2007).

These shifts in marital roles coincide with shifts in both sexes' preferences for mates (Buss, Shackelford, Kirkpartrick, & Larsen, 2001). Specifically, in U.S. data from 1939 to 1996, men's preference for a good house-keeper and cook decreased and their preference for partners with good financial prospects and a similar level of education increased. In turn, women's preference for a mate with ambition and industriousness decreased.

These temporal shifts in preferences are consistent with changes in marriage patterns in the United States. In particular, sociologists have documented shifts in the relation between individuals' economic prospects and marriage formation (Sweeney, 2002; Sweeney & Cancian, 2004). The traditional tendency for higher earnings to increase the likelihood of marriage for men but not women has changed over time as earnings have become more important for women's marital prospects. As a result, the relation between earnings and marriage is now similar for men and women. Also, the age gap in first marriages in the United States has declined from husbands being 2.8 years older than wives in 1940 to 1.8 years in 2005 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2006).

This male-female convergence in marital partners' earnings and ages and in the association between earnings and marriage is consistent with the considerable erosion of men's and women's preferences for the traditional combination of older male provider and younger female homemaker. These changed preferences have emerged flexibly as a result of shifts in social patterns such as declines in birth rates and hours spent in domestic labor (e.g., Bianchi et al., 2006) and women's increasing education and paid employment (e.g., Coontz, 2004).

Variation Across Individuals

Another method of testing social role predictions is to examine the mate preferences of people within a society who differ in their personal endorsement of traditional gender roles. In general, more traditional gender ideology should be associated with preferences for qualities in a mate that reflect the conventional homemaker-provider division of labor. Research demonstrating this principle in a nine-nation sample assessed gender ideology using Glick and Fiske's (1996, 1999) indexes of traditional, or "sexist," versus nontraditional, or "nonsexist," attitudes toward women and men (Eastwick et al., 2006). The study related these

attitudes to the sex-typed mate preferences of men for younger mates with homemaker skills and of women for older mates with breadwinning potential. Results revealed that more traditional gender ideology, as manifested in sexist attitudes toward women or men, was associated with conventional sex-typing of mate preferences—that is, men's preferences for mates with homemaking skills and younger age and women's for mates with provider skills and older age (see also Johannesen-Schmidt & Eagly, 2002). These relations were generally stable across the nine nations.

THE PRESENT RESEARCH

In this article, we move beyond correlational tests by reporting the first use of a possible selves experimental method to understand mate preferences. In two experiments, participants envision themselves in a particular future marital role. Consistent with the idea that the self functions as a filter or lens for viewing the world, the self-concept is essential to people's construction and negotiation of their future and present world (Markus & Nurius, 1986). Envisioning possible future selves can energize and direct behavior toward goals and thus underlie the achievement of long-term relational and occupational objectives. Implementing a possible selves method, our experiments asked participants to anticipate different marital roles and then indicate the type of mate they would prefer as an occupant of this role.

We also report a correlational test that relates individual differences in participants' personal expectations regarding their future marital roles to their mate preferences. Our hypotheses for these tests of social role theory follow from a single straightforward principle: that people prefer mates with attributes that complement their own anticipated marital role. In emphasizing complementarity, we thus offer an exception to the usual and widely confirmed principle that people seek and obtain similarity in marital partners (e.g., Amodio & Showers, 2005; Byrne, 1997; Kalmijn, 1994).

EXPERIMENT 1

This experiment explored participants' ideas about their future selves when married with young children. In the two experimental conditions, they imagined themselves having either a homemaker role or a provider role, and in the control condition, they were free to imagine whatever role came to mind for their future life as a married parent. Compared with participants envisioning a domestic role, those envisioning a provider role should show stronger preferences for a mate who has good

homemaker attributes and weaker preferences for a mate who has good provider attributes and is relatively older.

Because an assigned future self may not overwhelm chronic mate preferences, typical sex differences may also emerge (although perhaps in weakened form) for participants envisioning a homemaker or provider role. These sex differences should reflect the moderate division of labor that prevails in the United States. Given that women typically earn less than their husbands, have fewer hours of employment, and have more domestic responsibility (Bianchi et al., 2006; U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2007), women should exhibit stronger preferences than men for older mates with good provider characteristics. However, in our earlier research, we found that men did not value a mate's good homemaker qualities more than women did (Johannesen-Schmidt & Eagly, 2002), despite the cross-national prevalence of this male-female difference in preferences (Eagly & Wood, 1999). The evident erosion of this sex difference in younger U.S. samples may reflect the sharp decline in the amount of domestic labor that U.S. women perform (Bianchi et al., 2006) and women's evident desire for more equal sharing of domestic work (e.g., Wilkie, Ferree, & Ratcliff, 1998). Therefore, sex differences may be more likely to appear on preferences for a spouse's provider qualities and age.

Method

Participants and Procedure

The 66 male and 73 female participants were sampled from public settings on the Northwestern University campus (e.g., student center, library). Surveyors randomly selected participants to complete a questionnaire. Of those approached, 68% agreed to participate. Their mean age was 20.7 years, and their racial or ethnic descent was 63% European, 21% Asian, 8% African, 5% Hispanic, and 2% unknown or other. After each individual agreed to participate, the surveyor handed him or her the questionnaire that contained the possible selves manipulation followed by the measures, returned to collect it approximately 6 minutes later, and then handed the participant a written debriefing statement.

Possible Selves Manipulation

Written instructions asked participants to imagine themselves as married with children and either employed full-time outside the home (provider) or not employed but staying home to raise these children (homemaker). Control participants received only the information about being married with children. Assignment to these three conditions was random.

The instructions further indicated, "Even though you might never have such a life, please spend 5 minutes writing a paragraph describing your life as this person. What would you be doing on a day-to-day basis?" The two independent coders who read these paragraphs excluded 13 individuals who had refused to write about their assigned future self or responded frivolously (free marginals kappa = .79; Brennan & Prediger, 1981).

Measures

Mate preferences. The instructions directed participants to keep this future self in mind as they indicated their mate preferences. They rated how important each mate characteristic would be in a spouse by circling one of the following four response options: *irrelevant or unimportant*, *slightly important*, *moderately important*, or *indispensable*, which were coded as a 0 to 3 scale. Among these items, four pertained to provider characteristics (good financial provider, favorable social status or rating, ambition and industriousness, career-focused; α = .87), and four pertained to homemaker characteristics (desire for home and children, good with children, good home manager, good cook and housekeeper; α = .84). A factor analysis (principal axis factoring with promax rotation) of these items and inspection of the scree plot revealed a two-factor solution accounting for 71% of the variance, with each item loading .60 or greater on the appropriate factor. Results for items pertaining to other attributes are not reported because they were not systematically related to the possible selves manipulation nor did we hypothesize relationships.[1]

Finally, after being again reminded of their assigned future self, participants reported the age difference (in years) that they preferred between themselves and their future spouse. This preference was scored as negative for a younger spouse and positive for an older spouse.[2]

Other measures. After participants were instructed to stop responding as the assigned future self, they indicated their own sex, age, and marital intentions. Then the participants completed several items concerning their personal expectations about their own and their spouse's provider contributions at a time when they have young children. These items were scored to produce a measure of the expected provider contribution of wives. Participants thus indicated (a) their expected salary and (b) their spouse's expected salary. These two items yielded an index of the expected proportion of household income earned by the wife: a/(a + b) for female participants; b/(a + b) for male participants. Participants also indicated their preference concerning responsibility for earnings by indicating whether it would be better to make more (or less) money than their spouse. Also, on two items, participants indicated their expectations for full-time, part-time, or no employment

TABLE 1:   Experiment 1: Possible Selves Effects on Mate Preferences

| | | Possible Self | | | | | |
| | | Provider | | Homemaker | | Control | |
Group	Mate Preferences	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD
Men	Provider characteristics	1.05	0.72	1.99	0.60	1.07	0.69
	Homemaker characteristics	2.17	0.59	1.63	0.84	1.81	0.65
	Age difference	−1.02	2.58	−0.13	2.24	−1.05	2.13
Women	Provider characteristics	1.66	0.77	2.50	0.46	1.65	0.86
	Homemaker characteristics	2.27	0.64	1.64	0.74	1.80	0.94
	Age difference	1.02	2.28	2.74	1.98	1.55	2.49
Overall	Provider characteristics	1.37	0.80	2.27$_a$	0.58	1.36	0.82
	Homemaker characteristics	2.22$_a$	0.61	1.64	0.78	1.80	0.80
	Age difference	0.02	2.62	1.47$_a$	2.52	0.22	2.63

NOTE: Ns ranged from 135 to 139. On a 0 to 3 scale, higher numbers indicate greater importance of provider and homemaker characteristics in a spouse. For age difference (in years), positive values indicate preference for an older mate. Subscript a indicates a significant difference from the control condition within the row according to Dunnett's two-tailed post hoc test (tested for the overall means).

for themselves and their spouse. With all of these items scored so that higher numbers indicate greater provider inputs from the wife (i.e., self for female respondents, partner for male respondents), the items were standardized and then averaged to create a measure of the expected provider contributions of wives ($\alpha = .81$).

These same items also yielded a measure of the expected provider contributions of husbands, which was highly (negatively) correlated with the expected provider contributions of wives, $r(131) = −.84$, $p < .001$, and produced similar findings. Therefore, we report results only for the wives version of the measure. These correlational results, calculated on the combined Experiment 1 and 2 samples, appear after the reports of the experimental findings.

Results

The plausibility of participants imagining themselves as married with children was consistent with the findings that only 9% reported the intention not to marry and 10% not to have children. These participants are included, and their removal did not affect the findings.

Data were analyzed in a 3 (possible self: provider, homemaker, control) × 2 (participant sex: male, female) ANOVA separately for provider characteristics, homemaker characteristics, and preferred age difference. Means and standard deviations for each condition, overall and separated by participant sex, appear in Table 1 and for male and female participants, combined over conditions, in the top half of Table 2. We report main effects of possible self and sex. The Possible Self × Participant Sex interaction was nonsignificant on all reported analyses. Planned contrasts compared the provider and homemaker conditions. Comparisons of

these two experimental conditions with the control condition were post hoc (see Table 1).

For provider characteristics, the main effect of possible self was significant, $F(2, 133) = 25.10$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .27$. As expected, participants placed more importance on their spouse's provider characteristics when they envisioned a future homemaker self compared with a provider self, $F(1, 133) = 39.36$, $p < .001$.[3] Only the future homemakers' stronger provider preferences differed from the control participants. In addition, women placed more importance on provider characteristics than men did, $F(1, 133) = 23.20$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .15$.

For homemaker characteristics, the main effect of possible self was significant, $F(2, 133) = 7.98$, $p = .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .11$. As expected, participants placed more importance on their spouse's homemaker characteristics when they envisioned a future provider self compared with a homemaker self, $F(1, 133) = 14.98$, $p < .001$. Only the future providers' stronger homemaker preferences differed from the control participants. The main effect of participant sex did not approach significance.

For the preferred age difference, the main effect of possible self was significant, $F(2, 129) = 4.18$, $p = .017$, $\eta_p^2 = .06$. As expected, participants preferred an older mate when they envisioned a future homemaker self, compared with a provider self, $F(1, 129) = 7.61$, $p = .007$. Only the homemakers' preference for an older mate differed from the control participants. In addition, women desired an older mate than men did, $F(1, 129) = 39.91$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .24$.

Discussion

The manipulation of participants' future selves altered their mate preferences in the predicted ways. Compared

TABLE 2: Experiments 1 and 2: Male and Female Participants' Mate Preferences

| | Participant Sex | | | |
| | Male | | Female | |
Mate Preferences	M	SD	M	SD
Experiment 1				
Provider characteristics	1.36	0.80	1.96	0.81
Homemaker characteristics	1.88	0.72	1.91	0.81
Age difference	−0.75	2.34	1.79	2.33
Experiment 2				
Provider characteristics	1.66	0.69	1.93	0.64
Homemaker characteristics	1.96	0.58	2.30	0.43
Age difference	−0.35	1.49	1.86	1.81

NOTE: ns ranged from 65 to 66 male participants and 70 to 73 female participants in Experiment 1; ns were 96 male participants and ranged from 128 to 129 female participants in Experiment 2. On a 0 to 3 scale, higher numbers indicate greater importance of provider and homemaker characteristics in a spouse. For age difference (in years), positive values indicate preference for an older mate.

with participants envisioning a homemaker self, those envisioning a provider self placed more importance on a mate's homemaking skills and less importance on a mate's provider characteristics; they also preferred a relatively younger mate. Preferences thus shifted to correspond to the anticipated social role. These findings suggest that people have acquired the logic underlying our social role predictions for mate preferences. Both men and women apparently assume that they can maximize their outcomes in a future marriage by selecting a mate whose characteristics complement their own anticipated homemaker or provider responsibilities.

In addition, the conventional sex differences emerged for preferences concerning their future spouse's provider characteristics and age and were not diminished by anticipating a future self as a provider or homemaker. Envisioning oneself as a homemaker or provider, as manipulated by the experiment, was not sufficiently constraining to eliminate the impact of gender on preferences for a partner's earning capacity and age. Yet, consistent with Johannesen-Schmidt and Eagly's (2002) findings and with women's desire for change in the marital division of labor, female participants found a future mate's homemaking qualities just as important as did male participants.

EXPERIMENT 2

We designed an additional experiment to extend the findings of our initial experiment. A possible shortcoming of the first experiment is that the full-time employment condition may have been interpreted differently by the male and the female participants. In the United States, despite a marked convergence of the wages and employment patterns of men and women in recent decades, women who are employed full-time, compared with their male counterparts, have lower wages and somewhat shorter hours of paid employment on the average (Eagly & Carli, 2007; U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2007). Therefore, married women, more often than married men, are what might be termed a family's *secondary earner*, even if employed full-time. Consequently, the provider condition of Experiment 1 might have connoted secondary earner status to the female participants but primary or sole earner status to the male participants. Female and male participants' preferences for mates may not have converged in the provider condition of Experiment 1 at least in part because the men and women assumed different types of future provider roles.

To address this concern about interpretation of the provider role, we conducted another experiment manipulating future selves but with two provider conditions: One indicated sole earner status, and the other indicated secondary earner status. We hypothesized that participants envisioning themselves as secondary providers would report mate preferences intermediate between those in the sole provider and homemaker conditions on all three dependent variables: provider characteristics, homemaker characteristics, and age difference.

We made additional changes in the procedure to increase the potency of the possible selves manipulation. Specifically, we worded each mate preference item to remind participants to respond in the persona of their assigned future self. This change was intended to make it difficult for participants to slip out of their assigned self and report their own current mate preferences. Also, to make child care a salient concern in participants' imagined future lives, the new experiment specified for all participants that their children would be younger than 5 years of age. Finally, to facilitate participants' vivid imagining of their future selves, the new experiment was explicitly framed as a study of "possible future selves."

Method

Participants and Procedure

The 96 male and 129 female participants were students from the introductory psychology participant pool at Northwestern University who received partial course credit for participation. Their mean age was 19.2 years, and their ethnic or racial descent was 69% European, 21% Asian, 1% African, 5% Hispanic, and 4% unknown or other. Participants came to the

laboratory in groups of 3 to 15 to complete a series of questionnaires. Included within this larger packet of questionnaires was the role manipulation, followed by the dependent measures. After completing the entire set of questionnaires, participants were debriefed and dismissed.

Possible Selves Manipulation

The instructions noted that the study explored how well people can describe what their future life might be like under differing circumstances. Participants were instructed to imagine themselves at a time when they were married with children younger than 5 years old and were (a) their family's sole breadwinner, employed full-time outside the home (sole provider); (b) their family's secondary breadwinner, employed part-time outside the home (secondary provider); or (c) a stay-at-home parent (homemaker). Control participants received only the information about being married with children. Assignment to these four conditions was random.

As in Experiment 1, the participants then spent 5 minutes writing an essay describing their life under these circumstances. The two independent coders who read these paragraphs excluded 13 individuals who had refused to write about their assigned future self or responded frivolously (free marginals kappa = .95).

Measures

Mate preferences. Keeping their assigned role in mind, participants completed four items pertaining to provider characteristics (α = .76) and four items pertaining to homemaker characteristics (with the item good with children from Experiment 1 changed to good with young children; α = .67). Unlike Experiment 1, the phrasing of each item reiterated the possible selves manipulation (e.g., "If I were married, with young children, and were the sole breadwinner, I think that good financial provider would be . . . ; choices appeared on a 4-point scale ranging from *irrelevant or unimportant* in a spouse to *indispensable*). Consistent with Experiment 1, a factor analysis revealed the expected two-factor solution accounting for 56% of the variance, with each item loading .45 or greater on the appropriate factor. Preferred age difference in relation to a mate was assessed in the same manner as in Experiment 1.

Other measures. These were identical to those in Experiment 1.[4] For the measure of wives' expected provider contributions, α = .74.

Results

The plausibility of asking the participants to imagine being married with children was consistent with the findings that only 3% reported the personal intention not to marry and 4% not to have children. These participants are included, and their removal did not affect the findings.

Data for each of the dependent variables were separately analyzed in a 4 (possible self: sole provider, secondary provider, homemaker, control) × 2 (participant sex: male, female) ANOVA. Means and standard deviations for each condition, overall and separated by participant sex, appear in Table 3 and for male and female participants, combined over conditions, in the bottom half of Table 2. Planned contrasts compared the provider, secondary provider, and homemaker conditions. Comparisons of these three experimental conditions with the control condition were post hoc (see Table 3).

For provider characteristics, the main effect of possible self was significant, $F(3, 217) = 19.81$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .22$. The importance of these qualities increased as the assigned future self changed from sole provider to secondary provider to homemaker. Contrasts between these conditions showed that the sole providers had weaker provider preferences than both the secondary providers, $F(1, 217) = 33.00$, $p < .001$, and the homemakers, $F(1, 217) = 44.95$, $p < .001$, who did not differ from one another, $p = .274$. Both the secondary providers and the homemakers had stronger provider preferences than the control participants (see Table 3). In addition, female participants placed more importance on provider characteristics than male participants, $F(1, 217) = 10.16$, $p = .002$, $\eta_p^2 = .05$.

These two main effects were qualified by a significant Possible Self × Participant Sex interaction, $F(3, 217) = 8.75$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .11$ (see Figure 1 and Table 3).[5] Planned contrasts of male and female participants within the possible self conditions revealed that the greater female preference for provider characteristics was largest in the control condition, $F(1, 217) = 31.46$, $p < .001$, and still present in the sole provider condition, $F(1, 217) = 4.19$, $p = .042$, although significantly reduced compared with the control condition, planned interaction contrast $F(1, 217) = 5.92$, $p = .016$. The sex difference was nonsignificant in both the secondary provider condition, $p = .783$, and the homemaker condition, $p = .172$. Compared across the possible self conditions within participant sex, the male participants had significantly stronger provider preferences as secondary providers and homemakers than in the control condition; the female participants had significantly weaker provider preferences as sole providers than in the control condition (see Table 3).

For homemaker characteristics, the main effect of possible self was significant, $F(3, 217) = 8.01$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .10$. The importance of these qualities increased as the assigned future self changed from homemaker to

TABLE 3: Experiment 2: Possible Selves Effects on Mate Preferences

		Possible Self							
		Sole Provider		Secondary Provider		Homemaker		Control	
Group	Mate Preferences	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD
Men	Provider characteristics	1.25	0.65	2.02$_a$	0.49	2.27$_a$	0.45	1.21	0.48
	Homemaker characteristics	2.10	0.67	1.88	0.47	1.81	0.46	2.04	0.65
	Age difference	−0.70	1.11	−0.14	1.45	0.12	1.82	−0.63	1.47
Women	Provider characteristics	1.57$_a$	0.71	2.06	0.58	2.05	0.58	2.06	0.57
	Homemaker characteristics	2.66	0.29	2.18	0.34	2.11	0.35	2.24	0.51
	Age difference	1.27	1.32	2.09	1.46	2.13	1.82	1.97	2.43
Overall	Provider characteristics	1.44	0.70	2.04$_a$	0.54	2.14$_a$	0.54	1.67	0.68
	Homemaker characteristics	2.43$_a$	0.55	2.05	0.43	2.00	0.42	2.15	0.58
	Age difference	0.46	1.57	1.11	1.82	1.33	2.05	0.76	2.41

NOTE: Ns ranged from 224 to 225. On a 0 to 3 scale, higher numbers indicate greater importance of provider and homemaker characteristics in a spouse. For age difference (in years), positive values indicate preference for an older mate. Subscript a indicates a significant difference from the control condition within the row according to Dunnett's two-tailed pos thoc test (tested for the overall means combined across sex and for male and female participants separately for provider characteristics, given the significant Possible Self × Participant Sex interaction).

secondary provider to sole provider. Contrasts between these conditions showed that the sole providers had stronger homemaker preferences than both the secondary providers, $F(1, 217) = 15.00$, $p < .001$, and the homemakers, $F(1, 217) = 20.50$, $p < .001$, who did not differ from one another, $F(1, 217) = 0.56$, $p = .455$. Only the sole providers had stronger preferences than the control participants (see Table 3). In addition, female participants accorded greater importance to homemaker characteristics than did male participants, $F(1, 217) = 28.73$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .12$. The Possible Self × Participant Sex interaction was nonsignificant, $p = .232$.

For preferred age difference, the main effect of possible self was significant, $F(3, 216) = 2.62$, $p = .052$, $\eta_p^2 = .04$. The preference for a mate older than oneself increased as the assigned future self changed from sole provider to secondary provider to homemaker. Contrasts between these conditions showed that the sole providers differed from both the secondary providers, $F(1, 216) = 4.70$, $p = .031$, and the homemakers, $F(1, 216) = 6.55$, $p = .011$, who did not differ from one another, $p = .654$. None of these experimental conditions differed significantly from the control condition. In addition, female participants desired an older mate than did male participants, $F(1, 216) = 95.19$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .31$. The Possible Self × Participant Sex interaction was nonsignificant, $F(3, 216) = 0.42$, $p = .740$.

Discussion

The results of this second experiment generally replicated the first experiment in showing the power of the homemaker role to shift mate preferences toward those typical of women and of the provider role to shift mate preferences toward those typical of men. In addition, our differentiation of the provider role into sole providers and secondary providers further clarified these findings. The sole provider findings resembled the provider findings of Experiment 1, suggesting that most participants in the provider condition of the first experiment had envisioned themselves as a sole provider. The fact that the findings for the secondary providers were closer to those for the homemakers than the sole providers suggests that participants regarded spouses employed part-time as having considerable responsibility for domestic work. This assumption is apparently is quite realistic (Webber & Williams, 2008).

Also differentiating this second experiment from the first one, our procedures more effectively equalized male and female future marital roles by constraining participants to keep their role assignment clearly in mind when giving their mate preferences. With this change, the sex difference findings were somewhat different from Experiment 1: Women's greater preference for men's good economic prospects eroded considerably in the provider and homemaker conditions (but was intact in the control condition). The imposed roles in the experimental conditions thus were successful in modifying the typical sex difference whereby women show more interest than men in a mate's financial prospects.

One limitation of both of these studies is the artificiality of the marital expectations imposed by the experimental conditions. To address this concern, it would be informative to also examine relations between participants' own personal expectations and their mate preferences. We now turn to a correlational analysis that allows such an exploration.
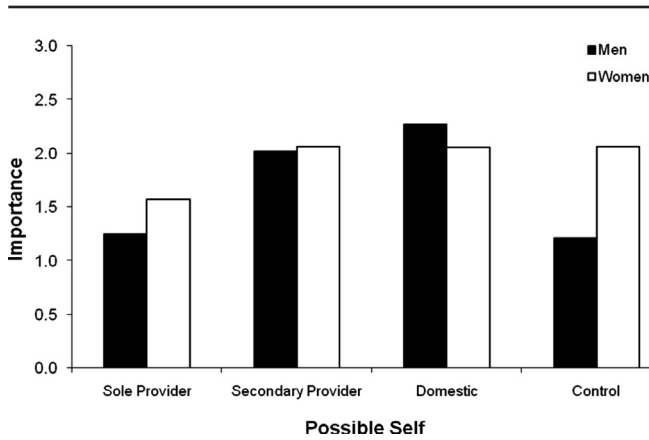
Figure 1 Experiment 2: Importance of provider characteristics in a spouse for male (black bars) and female (white bars) participants within the possible self conditions.

CORRELATIONAL ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

Because the participants in the control conditions of the two experiments were not asked to envision themselves as a provider or homemaker but were directed to envision themselves as a married person with children, their personal expectations for themselves within such a marital alliance would have come to mind. Therefore, their preferences for provider, homemaking, and age characteristics in a future mate yielded an additional test of our social-role predictions. For these control participants, we correlated their preferences for future mates with the individual difference measure of the expected provider contributions of wives (see Method of Experiment 1). The results for Experiments 1 and 2 were similar, and we report the analysis combined across the two experiments to increase power.

Consistent with the assumption that mate preferences reflect the complementarity of marital roles, we predicted that the male and female participants would differ in their associations between their mate preferences and their expectations for the division of provider responsibilities in their future marriages. Specifically, men who anticipate greater provider contributions from their future wife should accord more importance to their mate's provider characteristics and less importance to her homemaker characteristics; they should also prefer a relatively older spouse. In contrast, women who themselves anticipate making greater provider contributions as wives should accord less importance to their mate's provider characteristics and more importance to his homemaker characteristics; they should also prefer a relatively younger spouse.

As shown in Table 4, the findings were generally as predicted. To the extent that participants had greater provider expectations for wives, (a) female participants were less likely to desire provider characteristics in a mate and more likely to desire homemaker characteristics, and (b) male participants were less likely to desire homemaker characteristics in a mate and preferred a relatively older spouse. Although two of the correlations with provider expectations for wives were nonsignificant (female participants' preferences for their mate's age; male participants' preferences for their mate's provider characteristics), the differences between the male and female participants' correlations were significant for all three dependent variables. These data are consistent with the assumption that individuals' expected division of labor in their future family life shapes beliefs about the type of spouse that is desirable.

GENERAL DISCUSSION

In two experiments, participants envisioned themselves in a future role as a married person with children. This future self took the form of either a homemaker or a provider, or participants were free to envision this marital role as they wished. With their selves transported into their future family life, participants indicated their preferences for a mate.

In both experiments, envisioning oneself as a homemaker, compared with a provider, yielded stronger preferences for a mate with good provider qualities and weaker preferences for a mate with good homemaker qualities. The homemaker role also produced preferences for a relatively older spouse than did the provider role.

Comparisons of the experimental conditions of Experiments 1 and 2 with the control condition further clarified these findings and illustrated the complementarity of the provider and homemaker roles. Specifically, providers' stronger preferences for homemaker qualities distinguished them from the control condition, and homemakers' (and secondary providers') stronger preferences for provider qualities distinguished them from the control condition. Providers did not lessen the importance of mates' provider qualities, nor did homemakers lessen the importance of mates' homemaking qualities. Contemplating specific possible selves thus created more intense preferences for the crucial qualities that would be missing from the marital alliance, given the restrictions of the assigned role. Providers have limited time for domestic labor so seek homemaking qualities in a mate (e.g., good cook and housekeeper); homemakers have limited options for producing income so seek provider qualities in a mate (e.g., ambition and industriousness). In seeking a partner who would foster their well-being, our participants thus demonstrated an exquisite understanding that commitment to a confining homemaker or provider role

TABLE 4:   Experiments 1 and 2 Combined: Correlations Between the Expected Provider Contribution of Wives and Male and Female Participants' Mate Preferences

Mate Preferences	Expected Provider Contribution of Wives		
	Sex of Participants		
	Male	Female	t for Comparison
Provider characteristics	.03	−.37**	−2.07*
Homemaker characteristics	−.45**	.28*	3.71***
Age difference	.44**	−.13	−2.30*

NOTE: *n*s were 45 male participants and 51 (or 52) female participants. *t*s tested the Participant Sex × Expected Provider Contribution of Wives interaction in a regression equation that entered participant sex, expected provider contribution of wives, and their interaction as predictors of the relevant mate preference.
*$p < .05$. **$p < .01$. ***$p < .001$.

favors complementarity from one's life partner. On preferences for spousal age, despite the expected tendency for homemakers to prefer older spousal age than providers, only the homemakers differed from the control condition (and only in Study 1).

The control condition of the two experiments also yielded an individual differences test of our marital role hypothesis because these participants gave their preferences for mates' characteristics, unconstrained by the demand to think of themselves as a homemaker or provider. The findings confirmed the importance of expectations about marital roles. In general, both male and female participants had less traditional preferences for partner characteristics if they believed that the wife will have more provider responsibility.

The comparisons between the preferences of the female and male participants also illuminate contemporary mate preferences. Consistent with past research (e.g., Buss, 1989), the women had stronger preferences than the men for a spouse's provider characteristics (although not in all conditions of Experiment 2). The women also desired a spouse older than themselves, whereas the men desired a spouse younger than themselves. It is not surprising that these residual sex differences remained, especially on age preferences, despite our experimental manipulations. It would be difficult to design laboratory experimental manipulations powerful enough to overrule the conflux of influences that govern the preferences of women and men in daily life. In addition to expected marital roles, which we investigated in this research, these influences include broader gender roles expressing expectations about women and men in general (e.g., Eagly, 1987; Eagly et al., 2004). Indeed, our research has shown that individuals who personally endorse more traditional gender roles have more conventional mate preferences (Eastwick et al.,

2006). In addition, psychologists continue to debate a wide range of causes of male and female preferences for mates (e.g., Gangestad & Simpson, 2007).

Although women contribute a larger proportion of family income than ever before in the United States, our sex difference data suggest a lingering emphasis on men's economic prospects. The remaining, albeit weakened, marital division of labor likely underlies this sex difference in emphasis on a mate's economic prospects. Yet, in contrast to the continuing importance of men's economic contribution, women in our research valued a spouse's homemaker characteristics as much (Experiment 1) or more (Experiment 2) than men did. Women's evident search for mates willing to perform substantial domestic work reflects their understandable desire to avoid the "second shift" inherent in combining wage labor with full responsibility for their family's domestic work (Hochschild & Machung, 1989).

These studies raise the question of whether mate preferences influence actual choice of mates. Research by Eastwick and Finkel (2008) has cast some doubt on the importance of preferences in decisions to pursue romantic partners. At a speed-dating event, participants' preferences for particular qualities in mates did not predict their interest or romantic feelings toward the individuals they met. However, these researchers acknowledged that mate preferences may influence decisions once more committed, longer term relationships are established. Because marriage decisions have extremely important long-term consequences, individuals may assess how well a romantic partner conforms to their preferences at choice points leading up to the marriage (Gagné & Lydon, 2004).

The artificiality of our experimentally imposed possible selves also raises questions about the meaning of our findings. These participants had to envision a future as a homemaker or provider (sole or secondary in Experiment 2) and then give their partner preferences. Although students' thoughts about their future selves may often be fleeting in daily life, we think it plausible that they do in fact imagine future self scenarios, both in solitary rumination and in conversation with lovers, friends, and family. To the extent that students think about partners' attributes in these scenarios of future life, their preferences likely resemble those obtained in our data. The parallelism between these experimental findings and the individual differences findings in the control conditions strengthens this conclusion.

In summary, our research is important because it confirmed a key social structural prediction concerning mate preferences—namely, that these preferences reflect the marital division of labor. Although our use of an experimental method makes causation less ambiguous compared with earlier correlational tests of

this proposition (see Eagly et al., 2004), the possible selves method of this research favors a conscious, deliberative process of thinking about the implications of future roles for marital choices. Such processes probably are important for consequential decisions such as whom to marry and what career to pursue. In natural settings, external conditions (e.g., declining birth rates, lessening of sex discrimination) affect social patterns such as married women's labor force participation, and preferences for mates' characteristics are no doubt shaped by these changes. These preferences in turn exert effects on marital choices, speeding social change on its way.

NOTES

1. The additional items were the following: not overweight, education and intelligence, good health, mutual attraction and love, similar political background, similar religious background, good looks, emotional stability and maturity, dependable character, premarital chastity, refinement and neatness, similar education, sociability, pleasing disposition, and (in Experiment 2 only) sexually appealing.

2. On this measure, 18% (29% of men, 9% of women) desired a younger spouse than the self, 36% (12% of men, 57% of women) desired an older spouse, and 46% (59% of men, 34% of women) desired a spouse of the same age.

3. Because the possible self manipulation contained information about provider status and the measure of provider characteristics contained two items directly related to employment (good financial provider and career focused), demand characteristics could have enhanced the obtained effects. To address this issue, we removed the two items directly pertaining to employment from this measure, leaving only favorable social status or rating and ambition and industriousness. The main effect of possible self remained significant on this measure, $F(2, 134) = 14.41$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .18$.

4. On the age difference measure, 14% (30% of men, 2% of women) desired a younger spouse than the self, 42% (10% of men, 65% of women) desired an older spouse, and 44% (60% of men, 33% of women) desired a spouse of the same age.

5. As in Experiment 1, we addressed the demand characteristics issue by removing the two items directly pertaining to employment from the measure of provider characteristics, leaving only favorable social status or rating and ambition and industriousness. Both the possible self main effect, $F(2, 217) = 4.78$, $p = .003$, $\eta_p^2 = .06$, and the Possible Self × Participant Sex interaction, $F(2, 217) = 6.62$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .08$, remained significant.

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