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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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Word Count: 6724

Abstract

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 greater the provider responsibility anticipated for the wife, the less 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,

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Preferences of Women and Men

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 circumstances. 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 maximize the costs and benefits associated with their anticipated life outcomes. Beliefs about these costs and benefits are socially transmitted and shared within and between 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 creating different types of mating relationships and partners (Eagly & Wood, 1999; 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 manage domestic matters 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 roles and by correlating individual differences in anticipated marital 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 domestic 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). 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. 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 associated with the types of characteristics desired in mates, such evidence would offer support for this social-role account of mate preferences. Such tests can be arranged with various methods.

Variation across cultures. Because marital roles vary across contemporary societies, one type of test has examined cross-cultural variation in mate preferences. Specifically, reanalyses of the mate selection data of Buss's (1989) 37-cultures study have 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, 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 over time. 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 (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 breadwinning 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 housekeeper 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' ages and incomes and in the

association between earnings and marriage is consistent with the considerable erosion of

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 declining birth rates and hours spent in domestic work (e.g., Bianchi et al.,

2006) and women's increasing education and paid employment (e.g., Coontz, 2004).

Variation due to individual differences. 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, Eagly, Glick,

Johannesen-Schmidt, 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).

<div align="center">Experiment 1</div>

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

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 domestic 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 five minutes writing a paragraph describing your life as this person. What would you be doing on a day to day basis?" Based on two independent coders' reading of participants' responses, 13 were excluded for noncompliance with their future self assignment.

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 4 response options: *irrelevant or unimportant*, *slightly important*, *moderately important*, or *indispensable,* which were coded as a 0-3 scale. Among these items, 4 pertained to *provider characteristics* (good financial provider, favorable social status or rating, ambition and industriousness, career-focused; $\alpha = .87$), and 4 pertained to *homemaker characteristics* (desire for home and children, good with children, good home manager, good cook and housekeeper, $\alpha = .84$). A factor analysis (principal axis factoring with

promax rotation) of these items and inspection of the scree plot revealed a 2-factor solution accounting for 71% of the variance, with each item loading .6 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.

Finally, participants were again reminded of their assigned future self and asked to report the age difference (in years) they preferred between themselves and their future spouse. This preference was scored as negative for a younger spouse and positive for an older spouse.

Other measures. After participants were instructed to stop responding as the assigned future self, they indicated their sex, age, and marital intentions. Then the participants completed several items concerning their own 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 (on a 4-point scale) 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 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 appear in Table 1 and for male and female participants 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.

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 provider characteristics in a spouse when they envisioned a future homemaker self compared with a provider self, planned contrast $F(1,133) = 39.36$, $p < .001$. In addition, women placed more importance on provider characteristics than men, $F(1,133) = 23.20$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .15$.

For homemaker characteristics, the main effect of possible self was significant, $F(2,133) = 4.34$, $p = .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .11$. As expected, participants placed more importance on domestic characteristics in a spouse when they envisioned a future provider self compared with a homemaker self, $F(1,133) = 14.98$, $p < .001$. 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, η_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. In addition, women desired an older mate than men did, $F(1,129)$ = 39.91, $p < .001$, η_p^2 = .24.

Discussion

The manipulation of participants' future selves altered their mate preferences in the predicted ways. Compared with participants envisioning a homemaker self, those envisioning a provider self placed more importance on a mate's homemaker 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 provider characteristics and spouse's 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 who participated assumed different types of provider roles when assigned to this future self condition.

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 earners 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 childcare a salient concern in participants' imagined future lives, the new experiment specified for all participants that their children would be under 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 to15 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 under 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 five minutes writing an essay describing their life under these circumstances. Based on two independent coders' reading of these

responses, 13 students were excluded for noncompliance with their future self assignment.

Measures

Mate preferences. Keeping their assigned role in mind, participants completed 4 items pertaining to *provider characteristics* (α = .76) and 4 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 g*ood 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 2-factor solution accounting for 56% of the variance, with each item loading .45 or greater on the appropriate factor. Preferred age difference in a mate was assessed in the same manner as in Experiment 1.

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

<center>Results</center>

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: primary provider, secondary provider, homemaker, control) × 2 (Participant Sex: male, female) ANOVA. Means and standard deviations for each condition appear in Table 3 and for participant sex in the bottom half of Table 2.

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 differed from 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, $p = .274$. 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 for means). 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, $p = .172$.

For domestic 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 secondary provider to sole provider. Contrasts between these

conditions showed that the sole providers differed from 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, $F(1,217) = 0.56$, $p = .455$. 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, $p = .654$. 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, $F(3,216) = 0.42$, $p = .740$.

Correlational Analysis

Because the participants in the control conditions of the two experiments were not asked to envision themselves as a provider or homemaker, their personal expectations for themselves as a married person with children would have come to mind. Therefore, their mate preferences 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. 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 lives. 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 domestic 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 domestic 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 domestic characteristics, and (b) male participants were less likely to desire domestic 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 the expected division of labor in future family life shapes beliefs about the type of spouse that is desirable.

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.

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 domestic qualities. The homemaker role also produced preferences for a relatively older spouse than did the provider role. In the second experiment, 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.

The control condition of the two experiments 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 expectations for desirable partner characteristics if they believed that wives 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. The women also desired a spouse older than themselves, whereas the men desired a spouse younger than themselves. In contrast, consistent with Johannesen-Schmidt and Eagly's (2002) data, the conventionally stronger preference of men than women for homemaker characteristics was not found in either experiment.

These sex difference data suggest a lingering emphasis on men's economic prospects even though women contribute a larger proportion of family income than ever before. However, in Experiment 2, which 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, the findings were somewhat different: Women's greater preference for men's good economic prospects eroded in the provider and homemaker conditions (but was intact in the

control condition). These data are consistent with the claim that the remaining, albeit weakened, marital division of labor underlies the typical sex difference in emphasis on a mate's economic prospects. Yet, in contrast to the continuing importance of men's economic contribution, women 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 provide 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 long-term consequences, individuals may assess how well a romantic partner conforms to their preferences at choice points leading up to the marriage (Gagne & Lydon, 2004).

In conclusion, 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 correlational tests of this proposition (see Eagly, Wood, & Johannesen-Schmidt, 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) affect social patterns such as 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.

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Table 1

Experiment 1: Possible Selves Effects on Mate Preferences

	Possible self					
	Provider		Homemaker		Control	
Mate preferences	*M*	*SD*	*M*	*SD*	*M*	*SD*
Provider characteristics	1.37	0.80	2.27	0.58	1.36	0.82
Homemaker characteristics	2.22	0.61	1.64	0.78	1.80	0.80
Age difference	0.02	2.62	1.47	2.52	0.22	2.63

Note. *n*s ranged from 135 to 139. On a 0-3 scale, higher numbers indicate greater importance of provider and domestic characteristics in a spouse. For age difference (in years), positive values indicate a preference for an older mate.

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

Table 3

Experiment 2: Possible Selves Effects on Mate Preferences

Mate preferences	Possible self							
	Primary provider		Secondary provider		Homemaker		Control	
	M	*SD*	*M*	*SD*	*M*	*SD*	*M*	*SD*
Provider characteristics	1.44	0.70	2.04	0.54	2.14	0.54	1.67	0.68
Homemaker characteristics	2.43	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. *n*s ranged from 224 to 225. On a 0-3 scale, higher numbers indicate greater importance of provider and domestic characteristics in a spouse. For age difference (in years), positive values indicate a preference for an older mate.

Table 4

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

	Expected provider contribution of wives		
	Sex of participants		*t* for comparison
Mate preferences	Male	Female	
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 test 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.

Figure Caption

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.