Men's, but not women's, sociosexual orientation predicts couples' sensitivity to sexually dimorphic cues in own-sex faces

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While there is abundant evidence that people’s perceptions of own-sex individuals can change according to within-subject variation in their romantic partner’s sexual strategy, little is known about how relatively stable between-subjects differences in partners’ sexual strategies predict perceptions of own-sex individuals. The revised Sociosexual Orientation Inventory (SOI-R) assesses individuals’ openness to uncommitted sexual relationships and shows high test-retest reliability over long periods of time. High scores indicate greater openness to uncommitted sexual relationships. Here we tested whether the SOI-R scores of men and women in heterosexual romantic couples predicted their perceptions of own-sex faces displaying exaggerated sex-typical cues.

Man's SOI-R Predicts Own-Sex Perceptions

ANCOVA: within-subject factors of participant sex (male, female), sex of face judged (own-sex, opposite-sex), and judgment (dominance, attractiveness); covariates of woman’s SOI-R and man’s SOI-R. Couples, rather than individual participants, served as our unit of analysis. The main effect of man’s SOI-R ($F_{1,54} = 9.11, p = .004, \eta^2 = .144$) was qualified by a two-way interaction between man’s SOI-R and sex of face judged ($F_{1,54} = 7.73, p = .007, \eta^2 = .125$).

Data were then collapsed across the factors participant sex and judgment to produce two new variables: couple’s own-sex score and couple’s opposite-sex score. Man’s SOI-R was positively correlated with the couple’s own-sex score ($r = .450, p < .001$), but not the couple’s opposite-sex score ($r = -.004, p = .978$).

These findings suggest that both men’s and women’s perceptions of potential competitors for mates are sensitive to the male partner’s sexual strategy. We suggest that these individual differences in perceptions may function, at least partly, to increase men’s ability to compete for extra-pair and/or replacement mates and to enhance the effectiveness of women’s mate guarding.