**Background**

People around the world prioritize love, kindness, and faithfulness in a long-term mate (Buss, 2003). People also prioritize similarity, as evidenced by data showing that cues similar to one another in physical characteristics and psychological characteristics (Luo & Krishnan, 2003). 

But how much of mating is systematic and how much is random? Some researchers have suggested that preferences for looks and kindness and preferences for similarity narrow the pool of potential mates by only a little, and that mate preferences are actually mostly idiosyncratic (Lyytikäinen & Telegen, 1993). However, we propose that individual's mate preferences are systematically tied to their genetic dispositions and how they are raised. A sample of family members can be used to test this idea. Because typical family members share both genes and rearing environments, they should be similar in their mate preferences and attitudes.

The data we present here are from the first phase of a larger study that we designed to test that hypothesis. We surveyed male and female college students to get document variability in individuals' mate preferences and attitudes. In the next phase, which we plan to present next year, we will bring in family members' data and results pertaining to family member resemblance.

**Method**

Phase I participants were recruited from psychology and business classes at UWEC. The final sample included 33 men and 114 women (I = no sex reported; mean age = 20.6 ± 4.9). Participants completed three inventories: first, they completed a comprehensive mate preferences inventory. Next, participants rated how much they prioritize each of 121 characteristics that represent various categories of attributes that are relevant to mate choice.

- **Physical characteristics (15 items; e.g., attractive face)**
- **Emotional characteristics (10 items; e.g., emotionally stable)**
- **Demographic characteristics (5 items; e.g., comes from same family)**
- **Religious or spiritual characteristics (6 items; e.g., goes to church regularly)**
- **Marital characteristics (5 items; e.g., committed)**
- **Communication (3 items; e.g., good listener)**
- **Relationship-specific characteristics (9 items; e.g., prefers you)**

Next, participants completed the Big Five inventory (BFI), a measure of Conscientiousness, Extraversion, Openness, Agreeableness, and Emotional Stability (John et al., 1991). We used the BFI primarily to establish the validity of our data. The internal reliability for each of the five factors was above threshold, suggesting the validity of the overall data set. Finally, participants completed the Trait Relation Shipal Relevance Questionnaire (Schanne, 2016). We do not discuss those results here.

After completing the three inventories, participants provided contact information for parents and siblings. In the coming weeks we will begin Phase II, in which we will send questionnaires to these family members and ask them to complete the same inventories as well.

**Results**

This figure shows eight characteristics with both very high means and very low variance. By consensus, most of the young adults in our sample felt these traits were highly desirable or necessary. Other traits showing this pattern were environmentally conscious and comes from an educated family.

This figure shows eight characteristics of varying means, with high variance. Some participants found these characteristics highly desirable or necessary, while a sizable number of other participants did not want or need these characteristics. Other traits showing this pattern were socially conscious, and comes from a wealthy family.

This figure shows eight characteristics varying means, with high variance. Some participants found these characteristics highly desirable or necessary, while a sizable number of other participants did not want or need these characteristics. Other traits showing this pattern were socially conscious and comes from a wealthy family.

**Discussion**

Past research on human mate preferences has focused on the relative number of characteristics to document what people want most in a partner and to document differences between men and women's (Buss, 1991). However, few studies have described differences between people. Thus, in the current study, we asked men and women to rate a comprehensive list of characteristics – 121 of them – ranging from active lifestyle to good manners to outgoing to talkative. In this first stage of data collection and analysis, we have shown that some characteristics are, by consensus, perceived as imperative or highly desirable in a partner while some characteristics are more relative consensuses, perceived as not wanted or unnecessary. We also found some characteristics that are prioritized by some people and not at all by others — such as being religious, having similar political views, and liking children.

There are multiple directions to take as we continue to analyze these data. One is to check whether previously documented sex differences in mate preferences (Buss, 1989) replicate among the young adults in this sample. Indeed, preliminary analyses suggest that they did. A series of t-tests revealed that the men in our sample rated attributes associated with appearance significantly more than women did; attractive face, affectionate, body, and looks. And, the women in the sample valued attributes associated with long-term provisioning significantly more than men did: ambitious, financially secure, likes children, and mature.

Another direction for us to pursue is whether participants' personality traits covary systematically with their prioritization of certain characteristics. Past studies suggest that people's own personality traits are related to the personality traits they seek in a partner (Bowlby, Bus, & Shackelford, 1997). And, we can attempt to replicate those links. For example, we will investigate whether people who score high in extraversion prioritize extraversion in a partner, as indicated by high preference ratings for characteristics such as energetic, outgoing, and talkative.

Ideally, we would have gathered data on participants’ perceptions of their own standing on each of the characteristics they rated. If we had collected such data, we would be able to determine whether individual’s prioritoization of a trait in a partner the same as they have. For example, do they perceive themselves as displaying – and, likewise, whether they desire – the characteristics that they perceive themselves as lacking.

In the next phase of this larger research project we will collect more preferences and attributes data from Phase I participants' family members. If mate choice is mostly random, participants and their family members should not show much resemblance in their mate preferences and attitudes. However, if mating environments and shared genes are relevant to understanding the specific qualities people look for in a partner, then participants and their family members should show moderate and statistically significant similarity in their mate preferences and mating attitudes. Some of our original participants have given us permission to invite genetically unrelated family members (e.g., adoptive parents) into the study, as well. If we obtain a large enough subsample of genetically unrelated family members, we will be able to investigate whether genetically related family members (biological parent-offspring pairs, full sibling pairs) are more similar to each other than are unrelated family members (adoptive parent-offspring pairs, full sibling pairs). Such a pattern would implicate genetic influences on mate choice.

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References


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