

Getting Down to the Details in a Long-Term Mate: Traits That All People Prioritize... and Traits That Only Some People Prioritize

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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 couples are similar to one another in physical, cognitive, and psychological characteristics (Luo & Klohnen, 2005). Finally, humans also prioritize characteristics that are familiar to them, as evidenced by data showing that people select mates whose physical characteristics resemble those of their caregivers (Berezkei et al., 2004; Heffernan & Froye, 2015).

But how much of mating is systematic and how much is random? Some researchers have suggested that preferences for love and kindness and preferences for similarity narrow the pool of potential mates by only a little, and that mate preferences are actually mostly idiosyncratic (Lykken & Tellegen, 1993). However, we propose that individuals' 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 this hypothesis. We sampled male and female college students to first 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 our 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 (1= no sex reported), mean age = 20.26 ± 1.64.

Participants completed three inventories. First, they completed a comprehensive mate preferences inventory. 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)
- Intellect (7 items; e.g., analytical)
- Religion (3 items; e.g., practices a religion)
- Demographic characteristics (5 items; e.g., comes from an educated family)
- Attitudes and interests (9 items; e.g., outdoorsy)
- Conscientiousness (15 items; e.g., disciplined)
- Extraversion (13 items; e.g., adventurous)
- Openness (7 items; e.g., curious)
- Agreeableness (21 items; e.g., gives compliments)
- Emotional stability (8 items; e.g., deals well with criticism)
- Future-relevant characteristics (5 items; e.g., financially secure)
- Communication (3 items; e.g., good listener)
- Relationship-specific characteristics (9 items; e.g., prioritizes you)

Next, participants completed the Big Five Inventory (BFI), a measure of Conscientiousness, Extraversion, Openness, Agreeableness, and Emotional Stability (John, Donahue, Kentle, 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, thus suggesting the validity of the overall data set.] Finally, participants completed the Trent Relationship Scales Questionnaire (Scharfe, 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 the original participants did.

Results

Figure 1: High Priority Traits

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 *faithful, mature, and good sense of humor*.

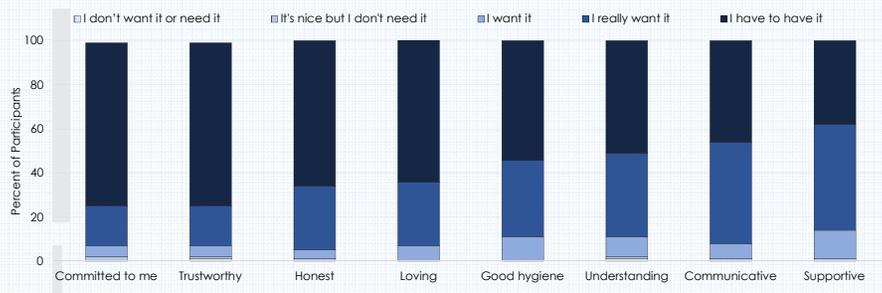


Figure 2: Low Priority Traits

This figure shows eight characteristics with both very low means and very low variance. By consensus, most of the young adults in our sample did not want or need these characteristics. Other traits showing this pattern were *similar race and comes from an educated family*.

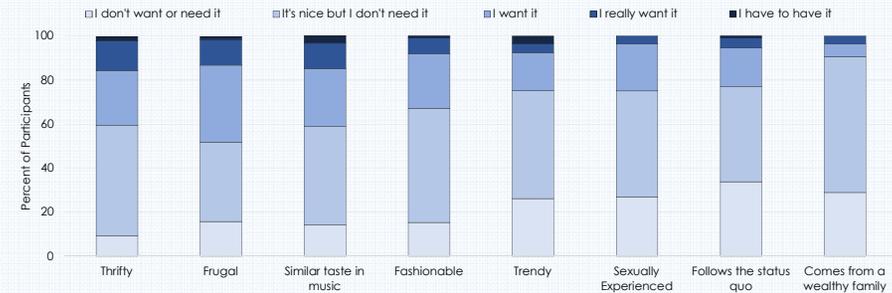
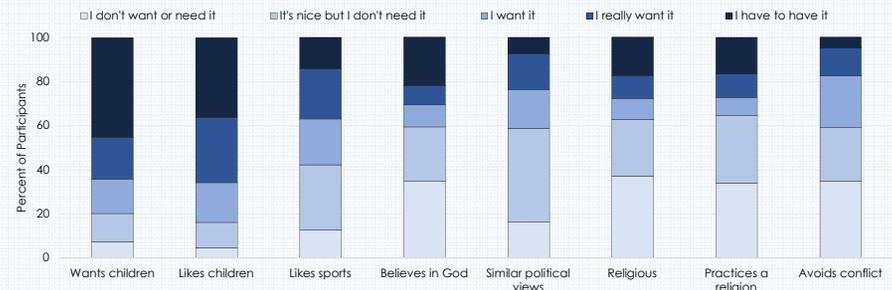


Figure 3: Varying Priority Traits

This figure shows eight characteristics of varying means, with high variance. Some participants found these characteristics highly desirable or necessary, but a sizable number of other participants did not want or need these characteristics. Other traits showing this pattern were *traditional, environmentally conscious, and likes to bend the rules a bit*.



Discussion

Past research on human mate preferences has focused on a small number of characteristics to document what people want most in a partner and to document consistent differences between men and women in mate preferences (e.g., Buss, 1989; Conroy-Beam et al., 2015). But thousands upon thousands of adjectives are used to describe differences between people. Thus, in the current study, we asked men and women to rate a more comprehensive list of characteristics – 121 of them – ranging from *active lifestyle to good manners to outdoorsy 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 and some characteristics are, by relative consensus, 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 analyses with 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 they did. A series of t-tests revealed that the men in our sample valued attributes associated with appearance significantly more than women did: *attractive face, attractive body, dresses well, and fashionable*; and the women in the sample valued attributes associated with long-term provisioning significantly more than men did: *ambitious, family-oriented, 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 (Botwin, Buss, & 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 those data, we would be able to determine whether individuals prioritize in a partner the same characteristics that they perceive themselves as displaying – and, likewise, whether they deprioritize the same characteristics that they perceive themselves as lacking.

In the next phase of this larger research project we will collect mate preferences and attitudes 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 rearing 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, adoptive siblings). Such a pattern would implicate genetic influences on mate choice.

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