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Desired Traits in Mate Selection: A Survey of Hispanic-American Female Students[1]

ABSTRACT. Previous research on mate selection has primarily focused on long-term relationships, i.e. spouse selection. Literature suggests that factors and traits playing a significant role in choosing a short-term partner have been mostly overlooked in mate-selection research. The present study, with a sample of 115 Hispanic-American females attending a public university, attempts to determine if there are significant differences in reported preferences when looking for short-term partners versus when looking for a long-term partner. The subjects individually listed their preferences for short-term partners from a list of traits generated by previous research. The participants were then put into groups consisting of five females in each group. Group members discuss their preferences among themselves and generate a list of desirable traits in a long-term partner. This paper reports the findings of the survey in two specific categories. It separates the desired traits for short-term and long-term partners, and it presents the differences in preferences based on relational status, i.e., single or in a relationship.

KEYWORDS: mate selection, casual dating, courtship & culture, marriage, interpersonal relationships

Introduction

In most Western, individualistic, cultures, individuals marry the person they love hoping to raise a family. Some marriages work for decades while in others, love and initial physical attraction deteriorate after a few years and marriages fail. Dissatisfied individuals either seek to dissolve their marriages or may engage in extra-marital liaisons. In many Western cultures, sexual infidelity and "keeping a mistress or a lover" are accepted practices. A majority of the casualties of failed marriages often remarry. In collectivistic cultures, marriages are not between two indi-

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viduals but two families[2]. The individuals are raised not to think only of themselves but for the entire family. The purpose, however, remains that the couple will have children and raise a family. It is anticipated that, in time, love will evolve between the two people. In collectivist cultures, with or without love, some marriages work, some don't. Many of the Eastern cultures also condone polygamy and concubines by simply looking the other way.

In the days of cave dwellers, the males sought females with physical features best suited for childbearing and child-rearing. Females looked for males that showed a promise for protecting the offspring and a willingness to teach the children to fish, hunt, and become self-reliant. Biological characteristics were the basis for mate selection. It was simple and based on practical concerns.

With the emergence of social systems and religions, societies shifted the natural mate selection process to fit new criteria established and enforced by a new social institution and organized religions. Old requirements of physical ability, endurance, and strength were replaced by values rooted in social status, wealth, political standing, and beauty. In almost all cultures, the concept of family, i.e., a social institution, became closely woven into the institution of marriage—an institution that reinforced the church and religious values.

Mate Selection Models

Dating, on college campuses, has become a lost social script, giving way to a culture of hookups, friends-with-benefits, and having sex with strangers or acquaintances instead of seeking committed partners. According to a recent study between 60 and 80 percent of North American college students admit to having had a hookup; 63 percent of college men

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[2] The notion of an arranged marriage, as it's still commonly practices in many parts of the Eastern world is not particularly unique to India or China. The royal families in Europe, as well as in, China and India, married for political and economic gains, and to avoid wars. Some of those marriage arrangements worked; many did not. Shakespeare's histories of Western royalty are peppered with tales of arranged marriages and infidelity. The Mughal Emperor, Shah Jahan, who supposedly build the Taj Mahal for his beloved queen, had seven wives and several concubines/maids.

and 83 percent of college women say they would prefer a traditional relationship (Khazan, 2014).

From the primitive methods of the cave dwellers to the present-day speed dating and hooking, numerous mate selection theories and models have emerged. A brief description of some of the significant theories is presented here. According to evolutionary psychologists and Natural Selection theorists, females were drawn to males that could provide for the family and teach the offspring to become self-reliant. Males sought females that seemed healthy enough for having, caring for, and raising the children (Buss & Kenrick, 1998; Looy, 2001; Heath et al., 2014).

The socio-economic conditions and opportunities, especially, in the Western world have impacted the priorities and preferences for men and women when choosing short-term as well as long-term companions. Thus far, the social scientists, biologists, and behavioral economists have studied mate-selection in regard to marriage. Casual dating and short-term relationships have only recently been considered a social phenomenon deserving of serious academic consideration.

The present study focuses on the preferences for mates of the Hispanic-American college-aged females—women aspiring to achieve professional success as well as personal goals that may or may not include having and raising children; that may elect to remain single or marry once they have attained their career goals.

Below are brief descriptions of several mate-selection theories that have guided previous research.

Social Homogamy theory suggests that men and women are attracted to people from similar social and cultural backgrounds, i.e., people tend to marry within their race, religion, socio-economic group and apply similar standards of beauty (Cloninger, 1980).

Ideal Mate theory claims that people have an unconscious image of an ideal mate and as soon as one comes across a person that fits one's ideal, one feels a strong attraction. Love, at first sight, can often be explained through the ideal mate theory. This theory also asserts that since most people use their parents as role models, people tend to choose partners that are similar, in appearance and traits, to their parents. Hence, men marry women that remind them of their mothers and women seek men that remind them of their fathers. Both behaviors, respectively known as the Oedipus complex and Medea complex are demonstrations of Ideal Mate theory at work.

Social Exchange theory asserts that since people can fall in love with different people, most people look for a person who would make an equal contribution toward tangible and intangible rewards in a long-term association. Both parties are expected to bring equal amounts to the table (Sprecher, 1998).

The developmental theory holds that people try different courtships and the one that seems to fit a couple's needs the best has the best chance of succeeding (Surra, 1990; Houts, Robins & Houston, 1996; Surra & Hughes, 1997).

The feminist theory states that marriages between older and more established men and younger women occur for two reasons. Firstly, older men have greater resources, are better able to provide financial security and a better lifestyle for their younger wives. Secondly, men with traditional patriarchal values find it easier to maintain a dominant status with younger women that have fewer resources (Eagly & Wood, 1999; Eagly, Wood & Johannesen-Schmidt, 2004).

Market Experience theory compares mate selection to an open market situation where buyers and sellers look for the best bargains by comparing costs and benefits of all available alternatives. Applied to mate selection, the market experience is the dating practice where individuals learn about potential mates through the first-hand experience before making their long-term partner selection.

Free-Choice Mate Selection theory holds that attraction is the strongest factor in relationship formation. The first stage in the formation of a relationship is attraction. If person A is not attracted to person B, not much more is likely to develop. When people are attracted to each other, they pursue a relationship; they may fall in love; they may get married (Kauth, 2000).

Like-Attracts-Like Selection. Not unlike social homogamy, this theory proposes that people from similar socioeconomic status raised in the same neighborhoods (physical proximity) are more like to meet, interact, date, and eventually create marital bonds (Buss, 1989).

There appear to be two common threads in all the above theories.

1. People do use some sort of a criterion in making mate selection.
2. These criteria are culture-specific.

The second factor explains the different rituals, traditions, mores, and customs practiced by different cultures in condoning and condemning selection methods.

Related Research

Scholars around the globe have studied the rationale and reasons in human mate selection and attraction. E.g., Buss (1989) conducted a meta-analysis of 37 samples from 33 countries to determine the role of six factors in mate selection—earning potential, ambition, industriousness, youth, physical attractiveness, and chastity. In other projects, researchers studied—for example—the differences in ages when men and women chose to get married, analyzed the cross-cultural dimensions of passionate love and sexual desire in mate selection, compared mate preferences in the US and Singapore, explored the information-seeking behavior of Generation Y students. Moreover, they reported on the freedom of making mate selection, and the importance of different values in Chinese and American cultures, as well as focused their attention on the mate selection of children of the immigrants in the US. compared the dating behavior of white American and young Filipino women, and on intercultural marriages.

The present study reports on the self-declared preferences for mates by Hispanic-American College students. Three reasons prompted the study. Firstly, the mate selection aspect of this population has thus far remained relatively unexamined. Secondly, the Hispanic-American college-age population represents first-generation immigrants or second-generation immigrants, and it is primarily made up of a generation known as Generation Y. A group that, although, has been studied widely by marketing scholars, sociologists, and behavioral psychologists, has remained neglected regarding its mate selection practices.

When it comes to the selection criteria for short-term relationships and casual dating, the researchers have looked at male preferences. A social double-standard prevails: a man seeking a short-term relationship is acceptable; a woman seeking a short-term relationship is not. Thus, boys can still be boys; girls may not be girls.

This study has focused on exploring what the young women, single and in relationships, seek in short-term as well as long term relationships. This text focuses on heterosexual (male-female) attraction and mating and does not consider the characteristics or circumstances of alternative style attraction and mating. The terminology and conceptual definitions for terms such as sex (noun and verb), gender, male, female, and sexual orientation are derived from Kauth (2005).

Methodology and Sample

One hundred and fifteen (115) females[3] enrolled in Interpersonal Communication courses participated in the study. The data were collected in two stages. First, the participants were asked to list as many as 10 characteristics they desired in a person that they would consider dating. The subjects were not permitted to discuss their choices with other participants. The instrument also asked the students to identify their relational status—whether they were single, in a relationship. This set of data was used to analyze preferences for short-term relationships. For the second part of the study, the subjects were put in groups—with five females in each group. The group members were allowed to discuss the desired traits and characteristics they would seek in a long-term partner. This set of data was used to analyze the preferences for a long-term relationship.

The participants were from a State-supported university with nearly 95 percent of Hispanic students. Thus, it was relatively easy to obtain a reasonable size sample (N=115) of Hispanic-American women. All respondents were under 30 years of age. Hence, age as a variable was not considered. However, this was clearly a Generation Y sample. Among the 115 women, 66 (57 percent) said they were in a relationship and 49 (43 percent) claimed to be single.

Results

A master list was generated from the list of desired traits identified by the respondents. These 74 traits are presented in Appendix. Table 1 presents the 10 most desired traits by the participants. The choice of traits desired in a short-term partner includes fun, good looks, good time, and romance. Women, when looking for a male for dating, i.e., a short-term relationship, report that loyalty, ambition, success, or the employability of a male are unimportant.

The preferences shift when one moves from being single to being in a relationship. Table 2 presents the ranking of the top-10 desired traits in a short-term relationship by single women (N=49) and women in a relationship (N=66).

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[3] Differences in preferences based on gender have been dealt in detail and reported, among others, by Buss (1989), Wood & Eagly (2002), and Fisman et al. (2005).

Table 1. Top-10 desired traits in a short-term partner (N=115)

Trait	Ranking
Funny	1
Taller	2
Athletic	3
Attractive	4
Romantic	5
Faithful	6
Open-minded	7
Employed	8
Ambitious	9
Successful	10

Table 2. Ranking of desired traits by single women and women in relationships

Ranking of Traits by Single Women (N=49)	Ranking of Traits by Women in Relationships (N=66)
1. Funny	7
2. Smart	1
3. Attractive	10
4. Adventurous	12
5. Attractive	9
6. Romantic	8
7. Taller	11
8. Responsible	2
9. Kind	6
10. Caring	5
11. Honest	4
12. Faithful	3

It is clear to see that priorities change from fun, adventure, and romance, while single, to traits like smart, responsible, and faithful that are more relevant to raising a family and building a home become more important. Previous research (Regan & Berscheid, 1997; Fisman et al., 2005), reported that males, both single and in relationships, were more drawn to looks and beauty than their female counterparts. Present data suggest that single women also place a higher value on looks and athleticism as important traits for a short-term relationship.

For an analysis of desirable traits in a long-term relationship, the subjects were put in groups of five. There were 23 groups. The group members

discussed among themselves and generated their list of traits desirable in a long-term partner. The top-20 traits, from the most important (#1) to the least important (#20) are presented in table 3.

Table 3. Desired traits in a long-term partner

Traits	Chosen by Groups (23)
Attractive	14 groups; 70 participants
Hardworking	13 groups; 65 participants
Respectful	13 groups; 65 participants
Family-oriented	10 groups; 50 participants
Supportive	10 groups; 50 participants
Faithful	9 groups; 45 participants
Honest	9 groups; 45 participants
Responsible	9 groups; 45 participants
Smart	9 groups; 45 participants
Funny	7 groups; 35 participants
Height (taller)	7 groups; 35 participants
Humor	7 groups; 35 participants
Romantic	7 groups; 35 participants
Career	5 groups; 25 participants
Loyal	5 groups; 25 participants
Outgoing	4 groups; 20 participants
Rich	4 groups; 20 participants
Trustworthy	4 groups; 20 participants
Ambitious	3 groups; 15 participants
Caring	3 groups; 15 participants
Good listener	3 groups; 15 participants
Goals	3 groups; 15 participants
Religious	3 groups; 15 participants

Factors

Individuals and their personalities play a vital role in mate selection and relational happiness. Botwin, Buss & Shackelford (1997), citing a five-factor model proposed by Goldberg focusing on married couples,

stated: "Women whose husbands scored high on Conscientiousness were generally more satisfied, as well as being happier with the spouse as a source of stimulating conversation" (1997, p. 128).

Factors and factor-analyses in previous studies have primarily dealt with married couples. For the present study, several traits were combined to create five factors contributing to the *desirability* of a long-term partner. These factors are (1) *Earning Potential*, (2) *Attractiveness*, (3) *Chastity*, (4) *Ambition/Drive*, and (5) *Family Orientation.*

- *Earning Potential* was calculated by combining traits such as Smart, Responsible, Career, Health, Rich, and Hardworking.
- *Attractiveness* was calculated by combining Attractive, Good Body, Athletic, Eyes, and Hair.
- *Chastity* was calculated by combining Loyalty, Faithful, Trustworthy, Religious, and Committed.
- *Ambition/Drive* was measure by adding Responsibility, Good Goals, Ambition, Confident, Successful, and Determined.
- *Family Orientation* was measured by combining Protective, Supportive, and Caring.

The perceived importance of these factors in selecting a long-term partner is presented in table 4.

Table 4. Importance of factors in selecting a long-term partner

Factors	Ranked
Earning Potential	#1
Family Orientation	#2
Ambition/Drive	#3
Attractiveness	#4
Chastity	#5

Discussion

There are some notable similarities and differences among Hispanic--American college students and their mainstream counterparts.

- Overwhelmingly, the sample ranked *Attractiveness* as the most desirable trait in men and women. As Knapp (1978) and Archer (1996) have suggested, physical attraction is the foundation for most short associations. Our sample reports that attraction is more important than some other factors even in long-term relationships.

- In this sample, women ranked *Attractive* as more desirable than *Faithful* for short-term as well as long-term relationships. Among the five factors, *Attractiveness*, comprising of good body, healthy hair, and pretty eyes as more important than *Chastity* that included traits such as loyal, faithful, trustworthy, and committed. This may reflect the current times where most young people make social comparisons with faces and bodies of the celebrities that decorate so many of the magazine covers and advertising. This may also be one of the characteristics of Generation Y as identified by Twenge (2006).
- As noted earlier, 83 percent of the college women in North America said that they would prefer a traditional relationship, in our sample, only 57 percent of the participants reported being in a relationship. A strong Catholic tradition among the Hispanic-American population may explain this negative discrepancy.
- Looking at the five factors, women still choose Earning Potential and Family Orientation over Attractiveness and Chastity.
- Like their American counterparts, the Hispanic-American women attending college are looking for fun with attractive partners without much concern for careers, earning potential, responsibility, or commitment. This is very much in line with the rest of Generation Y, not just in the US but globally (Finn & Donavan, 2013). However, when it comes to long-term relationships, the qualities that Hispanic women are looking for are not too far from the Natural Selection theories, and Social Homogamy theories, i.e., females look for men that can provide for the family and help raise the children. Neither single nor women in relationships report to having much concern about chastity.

The undercurrent in the present data alludes to the trial-and-error permitted in a society that allows dating—a practice that provides people with an opportunity to learn about and chose from several partners. In most of the Western societies, two of the most important social institutions, religion, and education continue to provide more than spiritual and academic guidance; these institutions create opportunities for young people to get to know one and another so that they may make the best possible selection in choosing their long-term partners.

Due to the size of the sample and lack of diversity in age, the author is hesitant in drawing any general conclusions. However, the findings warrant further research with different age-groups and in different cultures. Similar studies in cultures with other established practices for mate-selec-

tion may further enhance our understanding of the differences in behaviors and customs in other cultures. It may also be worthwhile to conduct a similar study with Hispanic-American males in the same age-group that are pursuing a college education. The present study has strictly limited itself to heterosexual females. It would be of great interest to study the preferences for desired traits in short-term and long-term partners among the women with alternative lifestyles.

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Appendix. List of Desired Traits

Adventurous
Ambitious
Athletic
Attractive
Brave
Car
Career
Caring
Committed
Confident
Cute
Deep voice
Determined
Dog lover
Down to earth
Eyelashes
Faithful
Family-oriented
Friendly
Fun
Funny
Good body
Good dancer
Good goals
Good hair
Good health
Good listener
Good personality
Great body
Hardworking
Has a job
Healthy hair
Height (taller)
Helpful
Higher Education
Honest
Humble
Humor
Independent
Kind

Likes animals
Likes children
Likes to cook
Loves to learn new things
Loyal
Mature
Never been arrested
Nice
Nice Eyes
Nice smile
Non-alcoholic
Non-cocky
Non-smoker
Not to romantic
Older
Open-minded
Outgoing
Patient
Polite
Positive
Pretty eyes
Protective
Reader
Religious
Respectful
Respectful to parents
Responsible
Rich
Romantic/loving
Same music interest
Sense of style
Smart
Spontaneous
STD free
Strong
Successful
Supportive
Sweet
Trustworthy
Understanding