

Character Strengths are Prominent as Mate Preferences of Turkish Students

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Abstract

This study addressed the traits and characteristics that Turkish students deem most important in a long-term romantic partner. We collected quantitative and qualitative data on characteristics desired in romantic partners from students attending Bahçeşehir Üniversitesi in Istanbul, Turkey. Like our previous cross-cultural studies conducted in Japan, Russia and the United States, results supported dependability and love as the most important traits. Overall, positive internal attributes were rated as highly important and we recommend the traits associated with the positive psychology movement be more fully considered in future studies on mate preferences.

A growing body of research literature has addressed mate preferences across widely differing cultures. Studies on mate preferences began with the pioneering work of postwar American psychologists, who first documented traits desired for long-term romantic partners among college students. To set the context for the present study, a brief overview is provided that includes the prevailing evolutionary perspective followed by an introduction to the perspective of positive psychology in regard to mate preferences. Portions of this literature review also appear in Pearce, Chuikova, Ramsey and Galyautdinova (2010) and Pearce and Khramtsova (2010).

Preferences from the Perspective of Evolutionary Psychology

Over 65 years ago Hill (1945) surveyed university students for preferences in a potential marriage partner and concluded that the most highly desirable partner attributes were dependable character, emotional stability, pleasing disposition, mutual attraction, good health, and desire for home and children. He noted women favored ambition and industriousness, education and general intelligence, and good financial prospects; whereas men emphasized good cooking and housekeeping skills, attractiveness, and a desire for home life and children. Such gender differences were successfully replicated in subsequent studies (Hudson

& Henze, 1969; McGinnis, 1958).

Although these studies exposed the rather stable nature of preferences, each of these studies' samples consisted of North American university students. Such a limitation restricted identification of potential cross-cultural similarities and differences in mate preferences.

Buss and colleagues (Buss, 1989; Buss et al., 1990) systematically examined mate preferences across the globe by studying 37 cultures within 33 countries. Buss, an evolutionary psychologist, highlighted the universal similarities among cultures by focusing on gender differences and the adaptive role these mechanisms play. For instance, Buss concluded that women in 36 out of the 37 cultures rated good financial prospects more desirable in a mate than males, which supported the notion that women desire a partner who has the willingness and capacity to provide them and their offspring with adequate resources (Buss & Schmitt, 1993). The evolutionary significance of these findings becomes apparent as women around the world have historically gravitated toward men with wealth and high status, thereby increasing the survival probability of any offspring through the provision of resources.

In 34 cultures, women rated ambition and industriousness as more desirable than men (Buss, 1989). Such evidence suggested that ambitious men were more likely to have a higher earning capacity and ultimately be the sole provider for the family. Results also confirmed that men desired younger partners while women desired older partners and showed that males valued physical attractiveness in their mates to a higher degree than their female counterparts. Furthermore, it was proposed that men may desire these qualities because women who are young and attractive will have a higher reproductive capacity (Buss, 1989; Buss & Schmitt, 1993). Many of Buss's findings confirmed some of the earliest research on mate preferences (Hill, 1945; Hudson & Henze, 1969; McGinnis, 1958), strengthening the position that most modern humans inherited and still display a specific set of mate preferences that are not easily modified by current social, economic, or cultural influences.

Introduction of Positive Psychology Into Mate Preference Studies

Rather than emphasizing adaptive mechanisms and gender differences, research from the perspective of positive psychology seeks to understand what makes life most worth living by focusing on internal strengths of character and positive experiences (Seligman, 2002; Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000; Seligman, Steen, Park, & Peterson, 2005). Positive psychologists

examine aspects and qualities that lead people to happier and more fulfilling lives while downplaying the negative characteristics associated with disease and mental illness. Peterson and Seligman (2004) developed a classification system of character strengths and virtues they believe promote and escalate human flourishing. In their book *Character Strengths and Virtues: A Handbook and Classification*, six overarching virtues were identified that they contend can be recognized in almost every human society: wisdom, courage, humanity, justice, temperance, and transcendence. These virtues contain 24 measurable trait-like strengths that contribute to an individual's life satisfaction.

Purpose of Present Study

Previous mate preference studies are valuable and enlightening, but they fall short in two key areas. First, with few exceptions (Li & Kenrick, 2006), studies have largely focused on gender differences and the explanations for such differences while simultaneously downplaying the significance of similarities. Second, studies focused overwhelmingly on external items on survey research instruments (e.g., financial resources, social status), including physical characteristics (e.g., attractiveness), with less attention to or more arbitrary selection of internal qualities (e.g., kindness and other strengths of personal character). Particularly these issues arise among the field of evolutionary psychology, which has addressed the adaptive nature of a variety of characteristics focused on the importance of and sex differences in external traits.

Our study constitutes an additional attempt to broaden the literature base on mate selection by directly comparing mate preference traits revealed from research in evolutionary psychology with those from an attribute framework established by the emerging field of positive psychology. Within this perspective internal traits are emphasized, such as happiness and fairness, and should be as important when people consider desired qualities of prospective mates. Our study also contributes to the cross-cultural research literature on mate selection by examining long-term mate selection preferences of Turkish students. We hoped to gain insight on the role and prominence of character strengths and virtues in mate preferences in this predominantly Islamic subpopulation.

We collected preference data via self-report surveys from Turkish college students on characteristics desired in long-term romantic partners. Students ranked potential traits taken from foundational research within both evolutionary and positive psychology. Following a

previous comparative study in the United States and Russia (Pearce, Chuikova, Ramsey, & Galyautdinova, 2010) and a student population in Japan (Pearce & Khramtsova, 2010), we hypothesized: (a) results from our study will support previous research on mate preferences linked to evolutionary psychology; (b) character strengths and virtues will feature prominently; (c) dependability and love will be among the most highly desirable characteristics.

Methodology

Participants

The sample consisted of 104 students (Men = 22; Women = 81) enrolled in courses at Bahçeşehir Üniversitesi located in Istanbul, Turkey. Ages ranged from 18 to 29 with a mean age of 20.72. Students identified their religion as Buddhism (1.0%), Christian (3.8%), Islamic (78.8%), Judaism (1.9%), None (13.5%), or Other (1.0%). Students did not receive compensation for their participation in the study, and the project was approved by the Arkansas State University Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects.

Procedure

The questionnaire was created in English then translated into Turkish. Multiple drafts were exchanged to ensure accuracy of the items and definitions and the final version was distributed in classrooms under anonymous and voluntary conditions.

Measurement

Participants completed two sections on the questionnaire, "Demographics" and "Desired Traits." In Demographics, information was collected on age, gender, student classification, race, and marital status. For Desired Traits, 37 traits were listed that referred to attributes a partner may possess. These items were adapted from the selection lists used in previous research (e.g., Buss & Barnes, 1986; Hill, 1945; Peterson & Seligman, 2004; Toro-Morn & Sprecher, 2003). Roughly half the items (18) derived from mate criteria research linked with evolutionary psychology and half the items (19) were specifically associated with research in the field of positive psychology. See Table 1.

Participants were asked to respond to the question: "What is important in a long-term romantic partner?" by indicating how important these 37 characteristics and traits were using a 5-point Likert importance scale: 0 (unimportant), 1 (of little importance), 2 (somewhat important), 3 (important), and 4 (indispensable).

In addition, two open-ended questions asked them to select from the list the most and least important qualities in a long-term partner and to provide reasons for their selection of these characteristics or traits.

Items were ranked in descending order and written responses translated from Turkish to English for content analysis. PASW Statistics 18 software was used for quantitative data analysis.

Results

As in previous studies in Japan (Pearce & Khramtsova, 2010), Russia, and the U.S. (Pearce, et al., 2010), dependability ranked among the highest, findings which were also supported by the qualitative data analyzed by content analysis. The remaining four of the top five traits were associated with character strengths: love, cooperation, authenticity, and happiness. See Table 2. When examined by gender, the rankings were similar except that stability and fairness replaced cooperation and authenticity in females.

To examine whether preferences differed as a function of sex, an independent samples t test was conducted with the 37 items as dependent variables. To control for Type I errors, the significance level was set at $p < .001$. This analysis revealed significant differences on several characteristics. See Table 3.

According to interviews conducted with Turkish students on the campus of Bahçeşehir Üniversitesi, dependability and love were at the core of mate preferences. One male student stated, "Being reliable [dependable] is very important. For me, reliance [dependability] is the thing that makes a relationship as it is." Another female student emphasized the importance of dependability by stating, "Reliability [dependability] is the most important characteristic. You can be happy with a person whom you trust. You are happy when you are peaceful beside him and you are peaceful when you trust his love." While dependability was ranked the highest, love also was considered a highly desired trait among Turkish students. A female student reported that love was a highly desired trait for hers personally by saying her partner would be "Full of love. I think if there is love, everything is possible."

Both quantitative and qualitative results suggested that positive internal states are among the most important qualities desired in a long-term romantic partner by Turkish students and lend support for these as universal preferences.

Discussion

Our studies are unique from other studies on mate preferences in that they address characteristics and traits

first proposed by both Hill (1945) which later influenced the the field of evolutionary psychology, and those from Seligman, et al (2005) associated with the positive psychology movement. . In the current study, support was found for all three of our initial hypotheses: (a) results from our study supported previous research on mate preferences linked to evolutionary psychology; (b) character strengths and virtues featured prominently, and; (c) dependability and love were among the most highly desirable characteristics. In support of the first hypothesis, with the exception of persistence, sex differences were as anticipated. That is, all significant differences between the males and females surveyed were noted on traits affiliated with evolutionary psychology.

In support of the second hypothesis results suggested positive internal states such as love, cooperation, authenticity and happiness are among the most important qualities desired in a long-term romantic partner by Turkish students and these data, along with our previous studies of students in the U.S., Russia (Pearce, et al., 2010) and Japan (Pearce & Khramtsova, 2010) lend additional support for these as universal preferences. Overall, positive attributes were rated as highly important and the attributes associated with evolutionary psychology were rated as less important.

Dependability and love were rated as highly important, congruent with research conducted by both Hill and Seligman. We can only speculate why dependability was rated as highly desirable in a long-term romantic partner by Turkish students. Turkey, which was historically a conservative Muslim country, has been increasingly adopting a Western lifestyle. With the longevity of relationships no longer dictated by cultural norms, individuals seek partners that would be reliable and trustworthy, which would guarantee stability and life-long commitment.

Unlike other studies of student preferences in the United States (Pearce, et al., 2010), religiosity was not rated as highly important here or in a similar study conducted in Japan (Pearce & Khramtsova, 2010), suggesting possible cultural differences for this trait. In the case of this sample, the majority of respondents associated with Islam but we did not ask to what degree. It is possible that the trait of religiosity was taken as a given, meaning that whomever their partner was, they would also be of the same religion thereby reducing the importance of this trait. We hope to address this limitation as well as translation issues and the possible gender bias in future studies.

Apart from dependability, four of the top five traits were personal characteristics from Seligman et al. (2005) and these were rated as more important in a potential mate than the traits consistently studied in evolutionary psychology over the past sixty years.

Table 1. Items included in the questionnaire and their respective psychology subfield affiliations.

| Evolutionary Psychology | | | Positive Psychology | | |
|--------------------------|------------------------------|----------------------------|---------------------|---------------------|----------------------------|
| Financial Stability | Dependability | Being younger than oneself | Leadership | Authenticity | Teamwork (Cooperation) |
| Ambition | Small physique | Cautiousness | Bravery | Zest | Self-regulation |
| Industriousness | Physical attractiveness | Being sexually experienced | Modesty | Kindness | Prudence |
| Large physique | Desires children | High social status | Gratefulness | Love | Hopefulness |
| Stability (Emotional) | Being Sexually inexperienced | | Forgiveness | Social Intelligence | Humorousness |
| Being older than oneself | Symmetrical features | | Persistence | Fairness | Religiousness/Spirituality |
| Physically strong | Good health | | Happiness | | |

Table 2. Overall characteristics and traits desired in a long-term romantic partner by Turkish students. The 5 lowest and 5 highest importance ratings are shown on a scale of 0 to 4.

| Highest Ranked Traits | Mean | SD | Lowest Ranked Traits | Mean | SD |
|-----------------------|------|------|------------------------------|------|------|
| Dependability | 3.83 | 0.45 | Religiousness/Spirituality | 1.52 | 1.42 |
| Love | 3.50 | 0.79 | Being older than oneself | 1.46 | 1.34 |
| Cooperation | 3.46 | 0.62 | Being sexually inexperienced | 0.99 | 1.29 |
| Authenticity | 3.41 | 0.71 | Being younger than oneself | 0.82 | 1.20 |
| Happiness | 3.41 | 0.71 | Small physique | 0.67 | 1.04 |

Table 3. Significant differences in importance ratings between male and female Turkish students.

| Trait | Sex | Mean | SD | t^* | Trait | Sex | Mean | SD | t^* |
|---------------------|--------|------|------|-------|--------------------------|--------|------|------|-------|
| Leadership | Male | 1.09 | 1.11 | -6.55 | Being older than oneself | Male | 0.41 | 0.73 | -4.48 |
| | Female | 2.62 | .93 | | | Female | 1.73 | 1.32 | |
| Financial stability | Male | 1.45 | 1.06 | -8.01 | Physically Strong | Male | 0.64 | 1.05 | -9.12 |
| | Female | 3.00 | 0.72 | | | Female | 2.75 | 0.94 | |
| Bravery | Male | 2.72 | 0.98 | -3.86 | Persistence | Male | 2.32 | 1.25 | -3.82 |
| | Female | 3.36 | 0.58 | | | Female | 3.14 | 1.26 | |
| Ambition | Male | 1.54 | 1.18 | -4.17 | Desires children | Male | 1.59 | 1.62 | -3.45 |
| | Female | 2.46 | 0.83 | | | Female | 2.70 | 1.26 | |
| Industriousness | Male | 2.41 | 1.26 | -4.51 | High Social Status | Male | 1.04 | 1.17 | -6.28 |
| | Female | 3.33 | 0.71 | | | Female | 2.56 | 0.95 | |
| Large physique | Male | 0.59 | 1.00 | -5.01 | * $p < .001$ | | | | |
| | Female | 1.86 | 1.07 | | | | | | |

In all studies we have conducted thus far, dependability and love have ranked numbers one and two on the importance scales. Such findings suggest that regardless of the culture, students desire partners with whom they can rely on and with whom they are in love.

We hope to expand our cross-cultural database examining such preferences for similarities and differences among cultures. We contend that future research on mate preferences should integrate traits examined

within positive psychology, evaluate their impact on people seeking a long-term romantic partner, and consider more elaborate interpretations of fitness benefits.

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