

Original Article

## Mate selection criteria: A trait desirability assessment study of sex differences in Serbia

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**Abstract:** This paper examines predictions from evolutionary and socio-structural perspectives on sex differences in mate selection criteria on a sample of 127 respondents from Serbia. The respondents, mainly college students, were asked to assess the degree of un/desirability of sixty behavioural and personality traits in a potential mate, on the 7-point Likert type scale. The sexes strongly agree in general ranking of the traits' desirability. The obtained statistically significant differences tend to favour the evolutionary interpretation. The largest differences are in the perceived desirability of thinness, strength, fearfulness, self-pity, fragility, aggressiveness, and beauty. Males perceived all these traits as more desirable (or less undesirable) than females, except that females valued strength more positively. Male respondents are less troubled by negative character traits of a potential partner, while females are less concerned with a partner's physical appearance. The higher status of women correlated positively with their concern with a mate's potential socio-economic status, contrary to the prediction of the socio-structural model.

**Keywords:** sex differences, mate selection, evolutionary psychology, attractiveness, Serbia.

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### Introduction

Research on sexual dimorphism in mate selection criteria has resulted in the broad generalization that women are more concerned with prospective mate's

potential control over social and economic resources and with (his) readiness to share them, while men pay relatively more attention to physical attractiveness (e.g., Buss, 1998, 1989; Buss and Schmitt, 1993; Townsend and Levy, 1990). The difference is, of course, relative: both women and men are concerned with mate's attractiveness and resourcefulness, but they differ in relative weight given to these two groups of characteristics (Buss, 1987). Convergence of the obtained findings corroborating this simple generalization about sex differences has been followed by divergent theoretical interpretations. Two general approaches are presently relevant: the socio-structural and that of evolutionary psychology.

Buss (1987, 1994) developed a number of evolutionary hypotheses concerning sex differences in mate selection criteria in humans. Since the number of offspring a *Homo sapiens* female can produce is limited, evolution would favor those who are able to secure sufficient resources for upbringing her offspring. Therefore, part of the female reproductive strategy is to secure mates that are able and willing to provide necessary resources. Hence, Buss (1987) concludes, female mate choice criteria should include signs indicating control or potential control over necessary resources, and related personality traits – ambition, dominance, diligence.

Basic limitation for males' reproductive success is not so much in the access to resources (since their parental investment is modest), but rather in their access to reproductively capable females (Buss, 1987). Since female reproductive value is closely related to age and health, these should be among the most important criteria males should take into account. Because it is difficult to directly assess health and age, "male mate preferences and standards of female beauty should evolve to reflect the physical and behavioral cues that signify female reproductive capability... Physical appearance probably provides the strongest set of cues, and these include features such as clear, smooth, and unblemished skin, lustrous hair, white teeth, clear eyes, and full lips" (Buss, 1987, p. 341; see also Symons, 1979). The expected sex differences have repeatedly been observed in different studies and in different cultures (e.g., Buss, 1994, 1989), and using different methodological approaches (Feingold, 1990).

Socio-structural perspectives view sex differences in mate selection criteria as the outcome of the interaction of class and gender inequalities, sexual power relations, and patriarchal ideology (Eagly and Wood, 1999; Jackson, 1992). Eagly and Wood (1999) attribute the decisive causal influence to the different social roles men and women are routinely assigned. Since typical male social roles are accompanied with greater power and prestige, women, lead by the desire to "maximize their outcomes within the constraints that society establish for people of their sex" (Eagly and Wood, 1999, p. 414), seek to exchange their appearance and nurturance for characteristics associated with male roles (see also Hamermesh and Biddle, 1994). In favor of the socio-structural interpretation, for example, could be the finding that in recent decades, with increased social and economic

equality, sexes have become more alike in their mate preferences, although the convergence seems to be mostly due to men approaching women's standards (Buss et al., 2001).

Contrary to the socio-structural hypothesis, however, a number of studies have found that women of higher socio-economic status emphasize the importance of potential partner's 'good financial prospects' even more than women of lower strata (e.g., Buss and Barnes 1986; Wiederman and Allgeier, 1992; Townsend, 1989; Townsend and Levy, 1990).

The debate between the two theoretical orientations still seems to be unresolved, as attested by different interpretations of the same cross-cultural data (Buss, 1989; Eagly and Wood, 1999; Kasser and Sharma, 1999). One of the possible ways to contribute to the issue is further cross-cultural research. Countries of the former 'Second World' are especially rarely studied in this respect, which is unfortunate given the emphasis placed on equality among sexes in the official ideology of the 'Real Socialism'. In reality, gender equality was pursued more sincerely with respect to political freedoms and the labor market than in the private sphere, where communists remained rather conservative. Thus, it is important to examine whether experience with the specific official ideology made our Serbian respondents different from those from other cultures.

Since Serbia culturally represents a mixture of patriarchalism and a socialist modernization project, we expected to replicate findings reported in the literature, but we also expected a difference of relatively small magnitude. On the basis of structural powerlessness hypothesis, we predicted that the socioeconomic status of women should be *negatively* related to their emphasis on economic resources of a potential mate.

Certain methodological aspects of the present study should be noted. We opted for the Likert-type items rather than for ranking in order to allow for the expression of equal desirability of different traits. We also included a rather extensive list of traits (60 items) in order to examine whether sex differences exist in other areas besides preferences for resources and physical attractiveness. Finally, the respondents were asked for their preferences concerning *long-term* potential mates. Hence, the expected sex differences should be more likely to appear since men tend to relax their requirements in the context of short-term mating (e.g., Buss, 1994; for women's perspective on short-term mating see Greilig and Buss, 2000).

## **Method**

### **Survey and respondents**

The survey was conducted in the spring of 1997, as a part of an extracurricular course in Social Psychology, at the Open University, Subotica, Serbia. Some of

the respondents were the attendants of the course, who themselves collected the rest of data by administering the questionnaire to their peers, family members and acquaintances. The sample is not a random one, but it is comparable to the samples from other related studies. Moreover, it is more diverse than typical psychology student samples. There were 127 respondents in total, of which 74 are females. The average age of the respondents is 18.5 years; the range from 15 to 42, and the majority of adolescent age: 81% being between 17 and 19 years old.

## **Instrument**

We applied the frequently-used technique of a closed-ended list of un/desirable traits in potential mates (e.g., Buss, 1989, Townsend, 1989; Wiederman and Allgeier, 1992). The respondents were asked to assess the degree of un/desirability of each of the 60 traits and characteristics (see Table 1) of a potential mate, on the 7-point Likert type scale (from 1 – completely undesirable, unimportant, to 7 – most important, most desirable). The questionnaire also asked for basic socio-demographic indicators, such as age, sex, and education. Youngsters were asked for their parents' education, while in case of adult respondents we used their own educational level.

## **Results**

Average estimates of trait desirability for the entire sample, and females and males separately, are given in Table 1. Looking at the results for the total sample, we can observe that among the traits assessed as the most desirable are *sincerity*, *faithfulness*, *tenderness*, *passion*, *reliability*, *maturity*, and *intelligence*. Traits assessed as moderately desirable or important are, for example, *courage*, *elegance*, *attractiveness*, *thinness*, *talent for sports*, *strength*, *thriftiness*, *dominance*. The least desirable, or the most undesirable are traits such as *conceitedness*, *selfishness*, *insecurity*, *aggressiveness*, *fearfulness*, *introversion*.

There is a strong agreement between the sexes about this general ordering of the traits, but there are some statistically significant differences. The largest differences ( $p < .01$ ) are in the desirability of *aggressiveness*, *thinness*, *strength*, *self-pity*, *fearfulness*, *fragility*, and *beauty*. Males perceived all these traits as more desirable (or less undesirable) than females, except for the *strength* which is more valued by women.

There are six additional items with somewhat smaller but still statistically significant differences ( $p < .05$ ). Two items refer to appearance - *good looks* and *attractiveness*, and four items refer to personality traits: *seriousness*, *independence*, *enterprising*, *sincerity*. Men scored higher on the former items, while the character traits were perceived as more desirable by women.

**Table 1** Mean trait desirability assessments for the entire sample and separately for females and males (ordered descending from the most desirable trait)

Traits*	Entire sample	Standard deviation	Males	Females	Significance of difference (two-tailed t-test)
1. Sincerity	6.34	1.03	6.08	6.53	p<.05
2. Faithfulness	6.29	.89	6.23	6.32	
3. Tenderness	5.90	1.23	5.98	5.84	
4. Reliability	5.79	.98	5.79	5.78	
5. Communicative	5.79	.92	5.83	5.77	
6. Passion	5.79	1.13	5.87	5.74	
7. Carefulness	5.78	1.09	5.80	5.77	
8. Amusing	5.70	.98	5.71	5.69	
9. Love for children	5.68	1.26	5.77	5.62	
10. Self-confidence	5.66	1.00	5.48	5.78	
11. Maturity	5.60	1.24	5.44	5.70	
12. Intelligence	5.52	1.32	5.38	5.62	
13. Kindness	5.52	1.00	5.60	5.46	
14. Tidiness	5.51	1.18	5.50	5.51	
15. Ability	5.48	1.15	5.42	5.53	
16. Sociability	5.46	1.12	5.54	5.41	
17. Optimism	5.42	1.37	5.52	5.35	
18. Sense of humor	5.40	1.10	5.35	5.43	
19. Good manners	5.34	1.32	5.26	5.39	
20. Diligence	5.32	1.11	5.33	5.31	
21. Capability to earn	5.31	1.37	5.08	5.47	
22. Physical attractiveness	5.29	1.11	5.50	5.14	
23. Independence	5.28	1.54	4.92	5.53	p<.05
24. Erudition	5.20	1.15	4.98	5.35	p<.05
25. Enterprising	5.19	1.21	4.92	5.36	
26. Beauty	5.19	1.29	5.60	4.92	p<.01
27. Ambition	5.17	1.33	5.02	5.28	
28. Youth	5.10	1.50	5.00	5.16	
29. Success in job	5.06	1.24	5.06	5.07	
30. Good taste in clothes	5.06	1.35	5.29	4.89	

31. Courage	5.02	1.33	4.98	5.05	
32. Good looks	5.02	1.33	5.34	4.81	p<.05
33. Elegance	4.93	1.38	5.08	4.82	
34. Attractiveness	4.82	1.40	5.12	4.61	p<.05
35. Seriousness	4.75	1.35	4.40	4.99	p<.05
36. Temperament	4.70	1.46	4.92	4.54	
37. Talkativeness	4.66	1.60	4.69	4.64	
38. Thinness	4.17	1.54	4.87	3.69	p<.0001
39. Talent for sports	4.09	1.38	4.00	4.15	
40. Strength	3.95	1.58	3.42	4.32	p<.001
41. Thriftiness	3.94	1.58	4.22	3.76	
42. Dominance	3.90	1.54	3.92	3.89	
43. To have money	3.88	1.64	3.82	3.92	
44. Interesting profession	3.73	1.43	3.84	3.65	
45. Popularity	3.64	1.59	3.87	3.49	
46. To have a car	3.64	1.55	3.54	3.70	
47. Popularity among the opposite sex	3.52	1.61	3.70	3.41	
48. Talent for arts	3.48	1.41	3.50	3.46	
49. Jealousy	2.79	1.59	2.90	2.70	
50. Fragility	2.64	1.44	3.04	2.36	p<.01
51. Shyness	2.61	1.55	2.84	2.46	
52. Overweight	2.53	1.35	2.31	2.69	
53. Introversion	2.18	1.57	2.29	2.11	
54. Spoilt brat	2.13	1.65	2.25	2.05	
55. Self-pity	2.02	1.54	2.56	1.65	p<.001
56. Aggressiveness	1.99	1.35	2.73	1.49	p<.0001
57. Fearfulness	1.89	1.16	2.29	1.61	p<.001
58. Insecurity	1.75	1.00	1.92	1.62	
59. Selfishness	1.70	1.36	1.94	1.54	
60. Conceitedness	1.56	1.18	1.75	1.42	

\*Desirability was estimated on the 7-point scale (1- undesirable; 7 - very desirable).

Correlation coefficients between the estimated trait desirability and socio-economic status, as indicated by the educational level of a respondent's parent with the higher degree of education, are shown in Table 2. In the total sample, SES correlates with the perceived desirability of a mate's *erudition* ( $r=.20$ ,

$p < .05$ ), *talkativeness* ( $r = .19$ ,  $p < .05$ ), and *interesting profession* ( $r = .25$ ,  $p < .01$ ). However, the results for the total sample hide the fact that none of the coefficients is significant in both subsamples.

**Table 2** Correlation between the perceived trait desirability and socio-economic status

Traits	Entire sample	Females	Males
10 Erudition	.20*	.36**	.04
28 Passion	.11	.33**	-.18
35 Taste for clothes	-.10	.03	-.30*
36 Talkativeness	.19*	.27*	.10
53 Interesting profession	.25**	.33**	.16

Note: Shown only traits where at least one coefficient is significant.

Among women, SES is in positive correlation with the estimated desirability of a mate's *erudition* ( $r = .36$ ,  $p < .01$ ), *passion* ( $r = .33$ ,  $p < .01$ ), *interesting profession* ( $r = .33$ ,  $p < .01$ ), and *talkativeness* ( $r = .27$ ,  $p < .05$ ). Among men, SES correlates (negatively) only with the importance attached to the *taste for clothes* ( $r = -.30$ ,  $p < .05$ ). Thus, higher status women desire better educated, more passionate partners, who have interesting profession and are more talkative. Lower status men desire, relatively more, partners who show better taste for clothes.

## Discussion

Of the 60 examined traits, statistically significant differences were obtained on 13 characteristics. The size of even the largest differences (e.g., *thinness*, *aggressiveness*) is relatively small in terms of the raw scores (somewhat above one raw score point). Just as in many other studies (e.g., Buss, 1987; Goodwin, 1990), we observed that sex differences in mate selection criteria are small.

Both sexes perceive traits such as *faithfulness*, *sincerity*, *tenderness*, *reliability*, *passion*, *carefulness*, as highly desirable. Traits with the opposite implications are assessed as the most undesirable (e.g., *conceitedness*, *selfishness*, *insecurity*, *aggressiveness*, *shyness*). These highly desirable and undesirable traits seem to be important for interpersonal functioning, and are often regarded as consequential for mate retention, rather than mate selection (cf. Buss, 1994).

Many of the characteristics particularly relevant for the present research problem are assessed as moderately desirable, or even neutral. In accordance with other reported results (Buss, 1989; Buss et al., 2001), traits pertaining to physical appearance are assessed as moderately desirable by both sexes. There is not a single trait referring to physical appearance in the upper third of the list - the

highest graded is *physical attractiveness*, and it is 22nd on the list.

One category of traits that does differentiate sexes indicates negative personality characteristics, including *fearfulness*, *self-pity*, and *aggressiveness*. Although both sexes evaluate these traits negatively, men are more ready to tolerate them in potential mates. From the point of view of evolutionary theory, the more negative attitude of females towards *fearfulness*, *fragility*, and *self-pity*, might speak of their anticipation of the failure of such person in social competition. At the same time, this can be explained from the perspective of the gender roles - these traits contradict traditionally defined masculinity.

*Seriousness*, *independence*, and being *enterprising* are traits assessed significantly more positively by women. From an evolutionary perspective traits like these are indirectly related to a mate's potential capability to secure resources and succeed in social competition. However, this provides rather modest support for the hypothesis about 'female choice'. Many of the traits more directly related to resource acquisition are equally desired by both sexes (e.g., *intelligence*, *ability*, *diligence*, *capability to earn*, *erudition*, *ambition*, *to have money*, or *to have a car*), thus confirming that "desire for status is fundamental dimension of mate preferences for both men and women" (Pratto, Sidanius and Stallworth, 1993).

*Thinness*, *attractiveness*, *good looks*, and *beauty* form another category of traits that significantly differentiate sexes. All these traits are indicators of physical appearance, and are significantly more positively valued by men. This result confirms sex-linked character of the importance of a mate's look in the long-term mating (e.g., Buss, 1994). It is interesting that a significant difference did *not* appear on the item *physical attractiveness* - the item that significantly differentiated sexes in 37 cultures (Buss, 1989).

Women's more positive assessment of a mate's *strength* has somewhat ambiguous meaning. Besides the 'bodyguard hypothesis' (Mesnick, 1997), *strength* can be interpreted as a character trait, potentially useful in social competition. On the other hand, strength could imply *physical attractiveness* from the female point of view. Pratto et al. (1993) found that items such as *dominant* and *tall* loaded on factor "sexy" that contained attractiveness and sexuality items among women. Similar reasoning could be applied to women's lower valuation of being *thin*, thus challenging the evolutionary psychologists' claim that females place less emphasis on the partner's physical appearance. Perhaps, male physical attractiveness is expressed in terms other than 'physical attractiveness'.

Finally, the higher desirability of *sincerity* expressed by women, together with their already discussed more positive assessment of various personality traits speaks not only about the care to choose a reliable partner, but also about the attention devoted to the quality of interpersonal relationship and a mate's personality characteristics. Similar results are reported by, for example, Smith et al. (1990), Botwin et al. (1997), Shaffer and Bazzini (1997), and Pratto et al.



(1993).

In order to examine the hypothesis about the functionality of mate selection criteria from the perspective of the subordinate position of women in socio-economic structure, we examined whether sex differences existed in the relatedness of SES and perceived trait desirability. SES generally does not correlate with perceived trait desirability. In the female sample, relatively low significant positive correlations are obtained between the SES and desirability of a mate's *erudition*, *passion*, *interesting profession*, and *talkativeness*. To the extent that *education* and *interesting profession* indicate higher (potential) status, this finding goes against socio-structural theories (cf. Wiederman and Allgeier, 1992). Women of higher socio-economic status could 'afford' relationships with lower status males since they themselves could provide resources, yet they instead increase their requirements. While cross-cultural research show that sex differences in the emphasis on resource-acquisition characteristics diminish in gender-egalitarian societies (Kasser and Sharma, 1999), our findings reinforce the generalization that intra-culturally women's preferences for high status mates increase with their SES.

From the perspective of the theories examined it is not clear why women's perception of desirability of *passion* and *talkativeness* increases with SES. It is possible that higher-status females tend to become more demanding in general, as if their higher status is treated as an additional asset in the mate selection strategy allowing women to increase their demands. Negative correlation of SES and *taste in clothing* on the sample of males (the only significant coefficient) is also of unclear theoretical relevance. It is possible that a clothes, as a status symbol, is more relevant for respondents of lower social status.

## Conclusions

The hypothesis formulated on the basis of the evolutionary psychology perspective received qualified support: results indicate that males tend to attach relatively greater weight to physical attractiveness of potential mates. Nevertheless, sex differences in the evaluation of *strength* and *thinness* could be interpreted as referring to male physical attractiveness, and therefore as evidence of women's specific emphasis on mate's physical attractiveness.

Women did not perceive traits directly referring to a mate's material wealth as more desirable than men (traits such as *capability to earn*, *success in job*, or *to have money*). The differences are obtained concerning the traits more indirectly related to material prospects of a potential mate, and to his readiness to share resources as well. These traits are *seriousness*, *independence*, being *enterprising*, and *sincerity*.

The hypothesis derived from (one possible interpretation of) socio-structural theories, stating that with higher socio-economic status women should attach less

importance to a mate's material perspective, is not supported. Moreover, the results contradict this hypothesis since higher SES is related with higher evaluation of a partner's *erudition* among women.

In general the results clearly suggest the essential similarity of men and women. Their congruence in the assigned desirability of the given traits is remarkable. Both sexes seem to strive for maximization along dimensions of attractiveness, status, and personality traits (Shaffer and Bazzini, 1997). Our respondents seem to be concerned first with finding a partner with whom they *could* develop and maintain a satisfying interpersonal relationship, and then with her or his appearance and economic status.

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