

BRIEF REPORT

Mate preferences of married persons in the newlywed year and three years later

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Mate preferences are cognitions about the characteristics desired in a romantic partner, and many of these cognitions have links with emotion, such as the preferences for “mutual attraction—love” and “emotional stability and maturity”. A large literature has emerged over the past several decades on the characteristics that men and women desire in a long-term mate. This research has addressed sex differences and similarities in mate preferences across different time periods, using different methodologies, and across many different cultures. The current research addresses an important but not yet investigated topic—the temporal stability of mate preferences within particular individuals. The mate preferences of a small sample of married couples were assessed during the first year of marriage and then again during the fourth year of marriage. Most mate preferences were stable over the assessment period, but there was some indication of change as well. Both husbands and wives, for example, provided higher importance ratings for “pleasing disposition” at the 3 year follow-up than at the newlywed assessment. Discussion addresses limitations of this research and situates the results within the literature on mate preferences.

Mate preferences are at the interface of cognition and emotion. Mate preferences are cognitions about the traits or characteristics desired in a romantic partner, and many of these cognitions have clear links with emotion, such as the preferences for “mutual attraction—love,” “emotional stability & maturity”, and “pleasing disposition” (see Buss, 2004, for a review). A remarkable amount of research has been conducted on the characteristics that men and women desire in a long-term mate. This research indicates

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that the mate preferences of men and women differ in several respects. For example, across several decades of assessments, across several methodologies, and across dozens of cultures, men more than women value physical attractiveness in a long-term mate, whereas women more than men value good financial prospects in a long-term mate (Buss, 1989; Buss, Shackelford, Kirkpatrick, & Larsen, 2001; Hill, 1945, Hoyt & Hudson, 1981; Hudson & Henze, 1969; Kenrick & Gutierrez, 1980; Kenrick, Neuberg, Zierk, & Krones, 1994; McGinnis, 1958; Wiederman & Allgeier, 1992).

The mate preference literature also indicates that men and women share several preferences. For example, both men and women place a high premium on the characteristics of “pleasing disposition” and “emotional stability and maturity” in potential long-term mates (Buss, 1989; Buss et al., 2001). In one study of 37 cultures, the highest rated attribute in a potential mate for men and women of all cultures was “mutual attraction—love” (Buss, 1989), indicating that for both sexes being loved by one’s mate is highly desirable in marriage. Regardless of whether mate preferences are studied with self-reports or personal advertisements, whether tested experimentally or through actual marital decisions, the research indicates that men and women possess reliably different, though in some ways similar, long-term mate preferences (see Buss, 2004, for a review).

Once a long-term mate is selected, several new challenges arise, such as maintaining a spouse’s interest and successfully raising children. Sometimes these challenges cause problems for a long-term relationship, and sometimes they result in divorce (see Buss, 2004, for a review). The challenges of marriage might result in a spouse’s re-evaluation of what he or she desires in a long-term partner. Alternatively, as people change and grow psychological and emotionally, mate preference changes might occur as a result.

The current research is a first attempt to investigate individual-level changes in mate preferences over time. The current research focuses on the stability and change of the mate preferences of a small sample of married couples. Both members of each couple provided ratings of the importance of 18 characteristics of a long-term mate, first during the first year of marriage and then again at a follow-up 3 years later. Previous reports are based on data provided by this sample (e.g., Buss, 1991). The current article, however, presents new analyses conducted to investigate questions not addressed in previous reports. The following three hypotheses motivated our enquiry:

Hypothesis 1. Men’s and women’s desires for a mate with “good financial prospects” should decrease over time. Based on Eagly and Wood’s (1999) view of mate preference psychology, the importance of “good financial prospects” should decrease as the resources that people accrue increase. Demographic research indicates that the financial status of both individuals and families increases over time (see Buss, 2004; Ellis, 1992). Thus, men’s and women’s desires for financial prospects, all else being equal, should decrease over time as their resource needs are met.

Hypothesis 2. Men’s and women’s desires for a mate with “good looks” should decrease over time. Various filter models of relationship formation (e.g., Murstein, 1970; and see Singh, 1993; Symons, 1995) have argued that physical attractiveness is more important at earlier stages of relationship formation. Once in marriage, some couples continue to evaluate the factors that define each stage, but most couples “move beyond” the early emphasis on physical attractiveness in potential mates (Murstein, 1976). Thus, men’s and women’s desires for physical attractiveness should decrease over time.

Hypothesis 3. Men's and women's desires for "pleasant" spousal personality traits should increase over time. Evidence suggests that a spouse's personality or disposition, such as whether the spouse is kind and considerate or disagreeable and selfish, impact the marital experience (Bentler & Newcomb, 1978; Buss, 2004; Gottman, 1993; Karney & Bradbury, 1995; Kelly & Conley, 1987). Some married individuals may come to sense over time that these key traits—particularly those associated with Agreeableness, Conscientiousness, and Neuroticism—play a powerful role in determining the quality of the marital relationship (see Buss, 2004; Townsend, 1998). Thus, the value that people place on pleasant personality traits (e.g., "pleasing disposition", "dependable character", and "emotional stability and maturity") should increase over time.

METHOD

Participants

This research includes two assessments of both members of 27 married couples. The first assessment occurred during the first year of marriage and the second assessment occurred during the fourth year of marriage. These couples represent a subset of a larger sample of married couples (see Buss, 1991). Both members of these couples completed the mate preference instrument at both the initial testing session and the 3 year follow-up.

Participants were obtained from the public records of marriage licences issued within a large county in the Midwestern United States. All couples married within a 6 month period were contacted by letter and invited to participate, in exchange for \$30 per couple. The majority of participants were Caucasian. The mean age of wives was 25.5 years ($SD = 4.1$). The mean age of husbands was 26.8 years ($SD = 3.8$). This was the first marriage for 96% of the sample.

The research team attempted to contact for a 3 year follow-up all couples who had participated in the first wave of this project ($N = 104$ couples). These contacts were attempted via postal mail and telephone. Some of the couples had moved without leaving a forwarding address or new telephone number. Some of the couples had divorced since the first wave of participation and hence were not eligible to participate in the 3 year follow-up. Some of the couples were still married but did not wish to participate in the 3 year follow-up. Of those couples that were still married and who agreed to participate in the 3 year follow-up, both members of 27 couples completed the mate preference instrument at both the initial and follow-up assessments. Couples were paid \$25 for their participation at the 3 year follow-up.

Procedures and materials

In the first wave of the project, newlywed couples came to a testing session at the researchers' university at a scheduled time. During this session, participants completed a standard measure of mate preferences (see Buss, 1989; Buss et al., 2001). Participants were instructed to rate the importance of each of 18 characteristics of a long-term mate, using the following scale: *Indispensable* = 3, *Important, but not indispensable* = 2, *Desirable, but not very important* = 1, and *Irrelevant or unimportant* = 0.

Participants also provided their age and completed a three-item assessment of current marital satisfaction ($\alpha = .75$ across husbands and wives; see Shackelford & Buss, 2000) that included the items: "Thinking about things all together, how would you say you feel about your marriage?", "How do you feel about your sexual relationship?", and "How

do you feel about your spouse as a source of encouragement and reassurance?" For each item, participants were provided with a 7-point Likert scale with 1 = *unsatisfied* and 7 = *extremely satisfied*. The assessment of marital satisfaction during the newlywed year allowed us to determine whether couples who were included in the current analyses differed in marital satisfaction from couples who were excluded from the current analyses because of incomplete data (see above).

At the 3 year follow-up, couples were mailed a packet of surveys that included the same mate preferences survey that they completed 3 years earlier, during the newlywed year. Couples were instructed to complete the surveys on their own, and to mail them back to the researcher in the stamped, pre-addressed envelope provided to them. For data provided at both the initial and follow-up assessments, confidentiality of responses was assured.

RESULTS

Prior to conducting analyses on the data provided by the 27 couples who participated in both the newlywed phase and the 3 year follow-up phase, we investigated the comparability of the members of these couples to those who were excluded from the analyses because one or both members did not provide data at the follow-up phase. For the primary analyses reported below, we reduced α from .05 to .01 (two-tailed) to decrease the risk of Type I error. For the comparability analyses, however, we set α to .05 (two-tailed), which is a more conservative strategy than reducing α to .01. Setting α to .05 is more conservative because it increases the likelihood of detecting significant differences between the included and excluded participants. Independent means *t*-tests revealed that included husbands did not differ from excluded husbands in age, marital satisfaction, or along any of the 18 mate preferences for data provided at the newlywed phase (all $ps > .05$; data and analyses are available upon request). A second set of independent means *t*-tests revealed that included wives did not differ from excluded wives in age, marital satisfaction, or along any of the 18 mate preferences for data provided at the newlywed phase (all $ps > .05$; data and analyses are available upon request). The included and excluded samples therefore were comparable in terms of age, marital satisfaction, and importance ratings for each of the 18 mate preferences provided at the newlywed phase.

Hypothesis testing

Hypothesis 1 led to the expectation that men and women would place less importance on "good financial prospects" during year 4 of marriage compared to year 1 of marriage (Eagly & Wood, 1999). We evaluated this hypothesis by taking the mean rating of "good financial prospects" from the year 1 of marriage and subtracting the mean rating of "good financial prospects" from year 4 of marriage. Table 1 presents the results of correlated-means *t*-tests on ratings provided during year 1 and year 4 for each of the 18 mate preferences, separately for husbands and their wives. For men, the difference between years 1 and 4 of marriage on this preference was negative ($M_{diff} = -0.04$), indicating that the preference increased slightly over time. However, this temporal shift was not statistically significant. For women, the preference difference between years 1 and 4 of marriage also was negative ($M_{diff} = -0.11$), but not statistically significant. Overall, Hypothesis 1 was not supported.

Hypothesis 2 led to the expectation that men and women would place less importance on "good looks" during year 4 of marriage compared to year 1 of marriage. We eval-

TABLE 1
Changes in importance ratings of mate preferences from year 1 of marriage to year 4 of marriage

Mate preferences	Change in mate preference (Year 1 and Year 4)					
	Husbands			Wives		
	M_{diff}	SD_{diff}	t	M_{diff}	SD_{diff}	t
Good cook and housekeeper	-0.15	0.72	-1.07	-0.15	0.55	-1.16
Pleasing disposition	-0.41	0.69	-3.05*	-0.48	0.70	-3.57**
Sociability	-0.22	0.64	-1.80	-0.15	0.66	-1.16
Similar educational background	-0.30	0.78	-1.99	0.00	0.81	-0.24
Refinement, neatness	0.00	0.62	0.00	-0.11	0.65	-0.77
Good financial prospects	-0.04	0.65	-0.30	-0.11	0.75	-0.77
Chastity	-0.19	0.56	-1.73	-0.22	0.51	-2.28
Dependable character	-0.33	0.62	-2.80*	-0.19	0.40	-2.43
Emotional stability and maturity	-0.15	0.53	-1.44	-0.22	0.64	-1.80
Desire for home and children	-0.11	0.85	-0.68	-0.30	0.87	-1.77
Favourable social status or rating	-0.19	0.96	-1.00	0.11	0.85	0.68
Good looks	-0.33	0.62	-2.80*	0.00	0.81	-0.24
Similar religious background	-0.01	0.92	0.42	-0.15	0.86	-0.89
Ambition and industriousness	-0.11	0.58	-1.00	-0.26	0.71	-1.89
Similar political background	-0.01	0.83	0.47	0.11	0.97	0.59
Mutual attraction—love	-0.01	0.38	-1.00	-0.11	0.42	-1.46
Good health	-0.01	0.62	-0.63	0.12	0.71	0.83
Education and intelligence	0.00	0.68	0.00	0.00	0.71	-0.27

Note: Data were provided by 27 men and 27 women comprising 27 married couples; df for men and for women = 26. M_{diff} = mean difference in importance of mate preference (where mean difference = mean importance rating in year 1 of marriage—mean importance rating in year 4 of marriage). SD_{diff} = standard deviation of mean difference in importance of mate preference. Participants rated mate preferences according to the following scale: 0 = Irrelevant or unimportant, 1 = Desirable, but not very important, 2 = Important, but not indispensable, 3 = Indispensable. Results were produced by correlated means t -tests. * $p < .01$; ** $p < .001$ (2-tailed).

uated this hypothesis by taking the mean rating of “good looks” from year 1 of marriage and subtracting the mean rating of “good looks” from year 4 of marriage. For men, the difference between years 1 and 4 of marriage was negative ($M_{diff} = -0.33$) and statistically significant, indicating that this mate preference increased—not decreased—over time. For women, there was no change over time in the desire for physical attractiveness. Overall, Hypothesis 2 was not supported.

Hypothesis 3 led to the expectation that men and women would place more importance on the personality traits of “pleasing disposition”, “dependable character”, and “emotional stability and maturity” during year 4 of marriage compared to year 1 of marriage. As hypothesised, we found that both men ($M_{diff} = -0.41$) and women ($M_{diff} = -0.48$) placed significantly greater emphasis on “pleasing disposition” during year 4 of marriage. Also as hypothesised, we found that men ($M_{diff} = -0.33$) placed significantly greater emphasis on “dependable character” during year 4 of marriage. For women, this

shift was apparent ($M_{diff} = -0.19$), but not statistically significant. Finally, for both men ($M_{diff} = -0.15$) and women ($M_{diff} = -0.22$), the desire for “emotional stability and maturity” increased over time, but neither increase was statistically significant.

Additional analyses of temporal change

Another way to investigate the stability and change of mate preferences from year 1 of marriage to year 4 of marriage is to compute correlations between the importance ratings provided in the newlywed year and the importance ratings provided at the 3-year follow-up. Table 2 presents the results of these cross-time correlations, separately for husbands and wives. For husbands, 10 of the 18 correlations were significantly positive, with the remaining correlations nonsignificantly positive. These correlations varied from a low of $r(26) = .21$ for “favourable social status or rating”, to a high of $r(26) = .79$ for “chastity”. For wives, 9 of the 18 correlations were significantly positive, with all but one of the remaining correlations nonsignificantly positive. The only negative correlation is $r(26) = -.08$ for “mutual attraction—love”. The correlations for wives varied from a low of $r(26) = -.08$ for “mutual attraction—love”, to a high of $r(26) = .82$ for “chastity” and “dependable character”.

The results presented in Tables 1 and 2 indicate some change over time in the importance ratings of several of the mate preferences from the newlywed year to year 4 of

TABLE 2
Correlations of importance ratings of mate preferences reported in year 1 of marriage with importance ratings of mate preferences reported in year 4 of marriage

<i>Mate preference</i>	<i>Husbands</i>	<i>Wives</i>
Good cook and housekeeper	0.36	0.55*
Pleasing disposition	0.36	0.36
Sociability	0.51*	0.36
Similar educational background	0.31	0.57*
Refinement, neatness	0.58*	0.39
Good financial prospects	0.62**	0.59**
Chastity	0.79**	0.82**
Dependable character	0.45	0.82**
Emotional stability and maturity	0.39	0.16
Desire for home & children	0.59**	0.51*
Favourable social status or rating	0.21	0.62**
Good looks	0.61**	0.38
Similar religious background	0.62**	0.63**
Ambition and industriousness	0.69**	0.49*
Similar political background	0.35	0.43
Mutual attraction—love	0.44	−0.08
Good health	0.67**	0.44
Education and intelligence	0.50*	0.31

Note: Data were provided by 27 men and 27 women comprising 27 married couples; *df* for men and for women = 26. Participants rated mate preferences according to the following scale: 0 = *Irrelevant or unimportant*, 1 = *Desirable, but not very important*, 2 = *Important, but not indispensable*, 3 = *Indispensable*. * $p < .01$; ** $p < .001$ (2-tailed).

marriage, for both husbands and wives. These same results indicate some stability over time for many of the mate preferences, for both husbands and wives. Another way to assess the stability of the importance ratings for mate preferences is to compute Spearman's rank-order correlation (r_s) for the 18 characteristics for ratings provided in the newlywed and fourth years of marriage. For husbands and for wives, calculated separately, this correlation was $r_s(26) = .98$. This correlation indicates substantial stability of the importance ratings of mate preferences for both husbands and wives from the newlywed year to year 4 of marriage.

DISCUSSION

This research indicates that the mate preferences of married men and women remain relatively stable from the newlywed year to the fourth year of marriage. This stability is revealed by the positive manifold of correlations for husbands and for wives between the importance ratings for 18 characteristics in a long-term mate provided during the newlywed year and at a 3-year follow-up. This relative stability is corroborated by the high rank-order correlations for husbands and for wives between the importance ratings for these characteristics at the two assessment periods. Finally, this relative stability of mate preferences is revealed by the findings that only a few of the importance ratings differ significantly for husbands and for wives from the newlywed assessment to the 3-year follow-up.

Alongside the pattern of findings that reveal stability of mate preferences for husbands and for wives, there is evidence for several intriguing changes over time. Direct tests of three hypotheses concerning temporal change in mate preferences receive some support. The hypothesis that desires for a long-term mate with "good financial prospects" would decrease over time is refuted. Instead, desires for good financial prospects appear to increase slightly over time, the opposite direction of what was hypothesised (Eagly & Wood, 1999). Paralleling the findings of Townsend (1998), it appears that as people gain increased access to resources, their preference for a long-term mate with resources does not abate.

The hypothesis that desires for "good looks" would decrease over time also is refuted. For men, there is a tendency for this preference to significantly increase over time. A large literature (reviewed in Buss, 2004, and in Buss et al., 2001) indicates that men place a higher premium than do women on the physical attractiveness of a long-term mate. The current results suggest that the importance that husbands place on physical attractiveness increases over time, with the increasing age and decreasing physical attractiveness of their wives (Singh, 1993; Symons, 1995).

Finally, the third hypothesis receives strong support. Changes in the mean importance ratings provided by husbands and by wives across the 3-year assessment interval reveal that both sexes provide significantly higher importance ratings for "pleasing disposition" at the 3-year follow-up than at the newlywed assessment. Husbands, in addition, provide significantly higher importance ratings for "dependable character" at the 3-year follow-up. Changes in ratings of "emotional stability and maturity" are in the predicted direction for both spouses. "Pleasing disposition", "dependable character", and "emotional stability and maturity" are traits of people who are high on three of the five

major factors of personality, Agreeableness, Conscientiousness, and Emotional Stability, respectively (Norman, 1963). One way of interpreting these findings is that, with a few years of marriage, both men and women come to appreciate how important it is for their marital well-being and personal well-being to have a spouse who is high in Agreeableness, Conscientiousness, and Emotional Stability. There is independent evidence that people who are disagreeable, unreliable, and neurotic inflict various emotional, psychological, and physical costs on their spouses, and that spousal disagreeableness, unreliability, and neuroticism are good predictors of marital dissatisfaction and divorce (Bentler & Newcomb, 1978; Gottman, 1993; Karney & Bradbury, 1995; Kelly & Conley, 1987).

Limitations and future research directions

The current research has important limitations. Securing reports from both members of married couples at time periods separated by several years is difficult, time-consuming, and potentially expensive, and we are pleased to have secured these assessments from 27 couples. This small sample, however, clearly is a limitation of the current research. Both the generalisability and the statistical power of our study are limited by our small sample size. With just 27 married couples participating at the two assessments, therefore, we urge readers to interpret these results with appropriate caution and tentativeness. This research ideally will be replicated with a larger sample.

A second limitation of this research is linked to the fact that of the 104 couples who provided data at the newlywed phase of the project, only 27 couples provided corresponding data at the 3-year follow-up. Husbands and wives who participated at both phases did not differ from husbands and wives who participated only at the newlywed phase in age, marital satisfaction, or in the importance ratings they gave to the 18 mate preferences. But beyond these data suggesting comparability of the included and excluded couples, we cannot be confident about the generalisability of the findings. The reader is cautioned to interpret the current results conservatively, keeping in mind that the results may apply only to members of married couples that participate in psychological research during their newlywed year and then again, assuming they are still married, at a 3-year follow-up.

In conclusion, the current research is the first investigation of the stability and change over time of the mate preferences of individuals. The mate preferences of both members of a sample of married couples were assessed during their newlywed year and then again at a 3-year follow-up. The results indicate that mate preferences are relatively stable over time, but that a few mate preferences change over time for husbands and for wives. Both sexes, for example, place a higher premium in the fourth year of marriage than during the newlywed year on the characteristic of "pleasing disposition". A next step for this area of research is to identify empirically the causes and consequences of stability and change in mate preferences among married individuals.

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