



## PREFERRED MATE CHARACTERISTICS IN KYRGYZSTAN

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### ABSTRACT

*The present study explored mate preferences for future marriage partners in a Central Asian Country, Kyrgyzstan. The findings indicated that Kyrgyz university students value highly both universally valued attributes (love, honesty and trustworthiness, kindness) and some culture specific attributes in a mate (respectfulness towards relatives in law). The results further indicated to gender differences as in line with established literature findings. Female students displayed greater preference for high earning potential and wealth. On the other hand, male students put greater importance in physical attractiveness, good housekeeping, similar religious background, chastity, and traditionalism. Male preferences seemed more on the traditional side than females in a developing country.*

**Keywords:** *Kyrgyzstan, mate preferences, university students*

### ÖZET

*Bu çalışma Orta Asya ülkesi Kırgızistan'da evliliklerdeki eş tercihlerini göz önüne sermektedir. Bulgular Kırgız üniversite öğrencilerinin evlenecek kimsede hem evrensellik taşıyan değerlere (aşk, dürüstlük ve eminlik, kibarlık), hem de bazı culture özel atıflara (evlilik akrabalığına hürmet) büyük önem verdiklerini göstermiştir. Bu sonuçlar ıstılahtaki yaygın kabul gören bulgulara koşut olarak cinsiyet farklılıklarını da göstermiştir. Kız öğrenciler malı mülkü daha fazla tercih etmiş, erkek öğrenciler ise fiziki çekiciliğe, ev becerisine, aynı dini paylaşmaya, namusa ve gelenekselliğe daha çok vurgu yapmışlardır. Gelişen bir ülkede erkeklerin tercihlerinin kızlardan daha gelenekselci olduğu görülmektedir.*

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**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Kırgızistan, eş tercihleri, üniversite öğrencileri.

Mate selection is an important issue for most individuals, so it has attracted much research attention in the literature. A large body of research has investigated the characteristics that females and males desire in prospective mates. Despite methodological and theoretical variations, this research has consistently pointed out that there were differences in some mate preferences between females and males across cultures.

To the date, one of the most influential studies with a large data set (from 37 cultures) was conducted by David Buss<sup>1</sup>. From (socio-biological) evolutionary standpoint, Buss hypothesized that females should prefer the males with good providing capacity. On the other hand, males should prefer females with good reproductive capability. His study provided support for these hypotheses. In thirty-six cultures, females rated financial prospects more highly than males and also in twenty-nine cultures females valued ambition and industriousness more highly than males. On the other hand, in all cultures studied, males preferred physical attractiveness more than females and preferred younger age compared to women. In addition, in most cultures, males desired chastity more than females. In support of these findings in 1990, Goodwin also reported that, in a heterosexual mate, physical attractiveness of females is more desirable than that of males.<sup>2</sup>

The findings of Buss study has been also supported by some other cross-cultural studies. Hatfield and Sprecher provided data from United States, Japan, and Russia.<sup>3</sup> Their study indicated that males tend to put greater preference to physical attractiveness in a female. On the contrary, females gave greater value to the status, money, intelligence, ambition, and potential for success. In another study with three different cultures (United States, India, and Turkey), Medora, Larson, Hortaçsu, and Dave concluded that, regardless of culture, significantly higher amount of men tend to emphasize physical attractiveness, and women tend to emphasize economical potential (education, occupation and potential to make money).<sup>4</sup>

In a more recent study with North American and Chinese university students, Toro-Morn and Sprecher reported that, in each culture, physical attractiveness, younger age, sexy

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<sup>1</sup> Buss, David, M., "Sex Differences in Human Mate Preferences: Evolutionary Hypotheses Tested in 37 Cultures", **Behavioral and Brain Sciences**, 12 (1989), pp.1-49.

<sup>2</sup> Goodwin, Robin, "Sex Differences Among Partner Preferences: Are the Sexes Really Very Similar?", **Sex Roles**, 23, (1990) , pp.501-513.

<sup>3</sup> Hatfield, Elaine, - Sprecher, Susan, "Men's and Women's Mate Preferences in the United States, Russia, and Japan", **Journal of Cross-Cultural Psychology**, 26 (1995), pp.728-50.

<sup>4</sup> Medora, Nilüfer P. - Larson, Jeffrey H. - Hortaçsu, Nuran - Dave, Parul, "Perceived Attitudes Towards Romantism: A Cross-Cultural Study of American, Asian, and Turkish Young Adults", **Journal of Comparative Family Studies**, 33 (2002), pp.155-178.

looking in a mate, were preferred to a greater degree by the males than the females.<sup>5</sup> Women in both culture desired more than men someone with higher earning potential, high social status and wealth. This study also found that some gender differences were culture specific. For example, Chinese females were found to value sense of humor, health, material possessions, power and athleticism to a greater degree than Chinese males. In contrast, Chinese males desired a good housekeeper more than Chinese females. Among the American sample, these differences were not significant but American females desired significantly more than males someone who wants children.

Previous research with relatively less studied national samples also indicated to gender differences in mate selection. From exchange perspective, Ingoldsby, Schvaneveldt, Uribe studied acceptable mate attributes in Ecuador<sup>6</sup>. In comparison to females, males were more accepting of a partner who was considered to be good looking, not overweight was younger and shorter than themselves. Despite some exceptions, they concluded that their findings would support the notion of universal sex differences. In a more recent study, Khallad studied mate selection in Jordan with 288 college students<sup>7</sup>. His findings were also in line with the study of David Buss indicating women's emphasis on good economic prospect and men's emphasis on good looks.<sup>8</sup>

This research shares similar findings on gender differences, however, some research traditions interpret it mainly from biological perspective (e.g., Buss) and some others from social perspectives (e.g., Young).<sup>9</sup> Female and male differences in the attributes preferred in mates were also related to cultural expectations. For example, good house keeping, chastity, and desire for children were more preferred in traditional societies in comparison to industrialized societies.<sup>10</sup> And this attributes are more likely to be emphasized by males than females in traditional societies as gender role expectations are clearly defined by culture.

Although research in mate selection has well developed in the west, the little is known in Central Asian cultures. This study aims at providing some exploratory information on what individuals think important in a mate in Kyrgyzstan, distant Central Asian country.

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<sup>5</sup> Toro-Morn, Maura, - Sprecher, Susan, "A Cross-Cultural Comparison of Mate preferences among University Students; The United States vs. The people's Republic of China (PRC)", **Journal of Comparative Family Studies**, 34 (2003), pp.151-170.

<sup>6</sup> Ingoldsby, Bron, - Schvaneveldt, Paul, - & Uribe, C. "Perceptions of Acceptable Mate Attributes in Ecuador", **Journal of Comparative Family Studies**, 34 (2003), pp.171-185.

<sup>7</sup> Khallad, Yacoub, "Mate Selection in Jordan: Effects of Sex, Socio-Economic Status, and Culture", **Journal of Social and Personal Relationships**, 22 (2005), pp.155-168.

<sup>8</sup> Buss, **i.b.i.d.**, pp.1-49.

<sup>9</sup> Buss, **i.b.i.d.**, pp.1-49; Young, M., **Mate Selection in Contemporary America: An Exchange Theory Perspective**, Unpublished Master's thesis, Utah State University, 1989.

<sup>10</sup>Buss, David M. - Abbott, M. - Angleitner, A. - Asherian, A. - Biaggio, A. - Blanco-Villasenor, A., et al., "International Preferences in Selecting Mates: A Study of 37 Cultures", **Journal of Cross-Cultural Psychology**, 21(1990), pp.5-47.

Kyrgyzstan is a multiethnic and multicultural society with the majority of its population being ethnic Kyrgyz. It has borders with Kazakhstan to the north, with China to the east, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan in the south and west. Formerly as a socialist country, it has gone under rapid transformation process in political and economic system. Unemployment and poverty increased and earlier social support systems collapsed. Consequently, this has some important impacts on people's relational lives, such as decreasing rates of marriage contracts,<sup>11</sup> negative attitudes toward marriage.<sup>12</sup> It may also reflect itself in preferences for future marriage partners.

Traditionally, in Kyrgyzstan, marriage is arranged or subject to family approval. After the Soviet period, dominant political ideology introduced more male female equality and freedom in matrimonial issues to Kyrgyz people.<sup>13</sup> According to Kleinbach et al., socialist regime changed traditional forms of marital behavior substantially. However, traditional customs and religious norms have also survived hand in hand with modern rules. For example, arranged marriages and payment of dowry have not been totally disappeared from practice. Bride kidnapping as a form of family formation has been still widely practiced. This corresponds to what Goodwin stated that there is no one type simple modernization.<sup>14</sup> Each modernization is more or less affected by the culture in which it develops.

The purpose of our study is two folds. Firstly, present study provides data indicating the most preferred mate characteristics in Kyrgyzstan. Secondly, this project concentrated on discovering gender differences in mate preferences among the students in Kyrgyzstan. As mentioned by Ingoldsby, et al., conclusions drawn from previous studies appear to be fairly universal but they have been rarely applied to other cultural settings.<sup>15</sup> In this context our study aims at to contribute to the literature through rarely studied culture from central Asia. In addition, we developed our own mate preferences list using both previous literature and through our own pilot study. In that way, we were able to compare our results with early literature and also we were able to include culture specific characteristics.

## METHOD

**Participants:** A total of 371 undergraduates participated in this study from social sciences related classes of four different universities in Bishkek (capital city of Kyrgyzstan): Humanities, National University, Manas University and Slavonic University. The sample

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<sup>11</sup> See, for exmple, Denissenko, Mikhail B., **Marriage Patterns in Kyrgyzstan**, <http://iussp2005.princeton.edu/download.aspx?submissionId=51401>

<sup>12</sup> Dolbik Vorobei, T. A., "What College Students Think about Problem of Marriage and Having Children", **Russian Social Science Review**, 46 (2005), pp.963-975.

<sup>13</sup> Denissenko, **i.b.i.d.**; Kleinbach, R. - Ablezova, M. - Aitieva, M., "Kidnapping for Marriages (ala kachuu) in a Kyrgyz Village", **Central Asian Survey**, 24 (2005), pp.191-202.

<sup>14</sup> Goodwin, **i.b.i.d.**, pp.18-46.

<sup>15</sup> Ingoldsby et al., **i.b.i.d.**, pp.171-185.

consisted of 92 males and 279 females. The mean age was 20.28 (Sd= 1.55) ranging from 18 to 25. Married individuals were excluded from the analysis.

**Instruments:** Participants completed a questionnaire including items for demographics and mate characteristic. The majority of items were close-ended. The instrument contained 38 mate characteristics which were rated on a likert type 5-point scale (ranging from very important/indispensable to not important). These characteristics derived from mate selection lists used in previous research.<sup>16</sup> In line with the suggestion made by Medora and her colleagues, the instrument also included culture specific characteristics that have defined through a preliminary study.<sup>17</sup> In the preliminary study, 29 students were asked to write a list of important mate characteristics they would look for in a future marriage partner. Then these characteristics examined and every new characteristic provided by the students was included in the preferences list. Therefore, the characteristics which did not take place in previous studies, such as traditionalism, kindness toward a relative-in-law, were included in our study.

**Procedure:** During classroom sessions, participants were asked to complete the questionnaire voluntarily. The purpose of the research was explained and cautions were taken to ensure anonymity. It took participants around 15 minutes to complete this questionnaire.

## RESULTS

Table 1 provides general information on which characteristics preferred most and least. All the characteristics and their means and standard deviations were given in order from the most preferred to the least preferred. Most preferred characteristics included mutual love, honesty and trustworthiness, kindness towards relatives, high intelligence, warmth and kindness, sexually faithfulness. On the other hand, traditionalism, religiousness, popularity and having low and high numbers of brothers and sisters were among the least preferred attributes.

**Gender differences:** To examine gender differences, for each item, an independent t-test was computed comparing the male and female scores. The Bonferroni procedure is used for controlling inflated Type I error rate (.05/38). The significance level was set to  $p < .001$ .

Between females and males, significant differences were found on items regarding high earning potential, good housekeeping, wealth, physical attractiveness, similar religious background, chastity, and traditionalism as it is shown in Table 2. Women more than men preferred a partner who has high earning potential, wealth. On the other hand men expressed stronger preference for a partner who is physically attractive, good housekeeper, respectful towards traditions, has no earlier sexual relations (chastity), and has a similar religious background.

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<sup>16</sup> Toro-Morn - Sprecher, *i.b.i.d.*, pp.151-170; Buss, *i.b.i.d.*, pp.1-49.

<sup>17</sup> Medora et al., *i.b.i.d.*, pp.155-170.

**Table I**  
**Descriptive Statistics (Means and Standard Deviations) for Mate Characteristics for Total Sample in Kyrgyzstan**

Rank	Mate characteristics	<i>M</i>	<i>Sd</i>
1.	Love	4.74	.67
2.	Good health for having children	4.56	.74
3.	Honesty and trustworthiness	4.50	.69
4.	Respectfulness towards relatives in law	4.46	.84
5.	Sexual faithfulness	4.38	.96
6.	Willingness to have children	4.32	.95
7.	Intelligence	4.30	.77
8.	Warmth and kindness	4.29	.80
9.	Health	4.25	.84
10.	Physical strength	4.20	.92
11.	Financial security	4.19	1.19
12.	Openness and expressiveness	4.12	.80
13.	Emotional stability and maturity	3.95	.95
14.	High education level	3.95	1.06
15.	Good housekeeping	3.92	1.02
16.	Ambitiousness, industriousness	3.90	.95
17.	Exciting personality	3.81	.94
18.	Sociable and friendly	3.80	.90
19.	Good Sense of humor	3.66	1.02
20.	High earning potential	3.64	1.16
21.	Family approval (my family approves him/her)	3.64	1.27
22.	Sexual attractiveness	3.51	1.21
23.	Good genetic background	3.49	1.23
24.	Good family background	3.48	1.22
25.	Physical attractiveness	3.30	1.03
26.	Creativity and artistry	3.07	1.15
27.	Wealth	3.00	1.22
28.	Similar religious background	2.98	1.61
29.	Athletic appearance	2.97	1.17
30.	Having living parents	2.92	1.39
31.	High social status	2.85	1.18
32.	Chastity	2.63	1.66
33.	Similar political background	2.49	1.34
34.	Traditionalism	2.32	1.18
35.	Religiousness	2.28	1.36
36.	Popularity	2.03	1.05
37.	Having many sisters and brothers	2.01	1.10
38.	Having few sisters and brothers	1.83	.96

**Table 2:**  
**The results of t tests revealing significant mean differences ( $p < .001$ ) for Gender with regard to mate characteristics**

Characteristics	Females		Males		df	t	p
	M	SD	M	SD			
High earning potential	393	.99	266	1.19	367	9.02	.000
Good housekeeping	374	1.08	429	.84	362	-4.64	.000
Wealth	328	1.13	214	1.14	364	8.27	.000
Physical attractiveness	316	1.05	364	.93	365	-3.95	.000
Similar religious background	279	1.58	362	1.54	361	-4.51	.000
Chastity	219	1.48	400	1.43	364	2.96	.000
Traditionalism	211	1.09	292	1.27	361	-5.29	.000

## DISCUSSION

The results of this study correspond to what earlier studies found regarding mate preferences of women and men.<sup>18</sup> In these earlier studies, overall participants rated personality traits regarding honesty and trustworthiness, warmth and kindness among their highly preferred attributes for a mate. In our study these attributes were also preferred highly strongly by overall participants. This supports the notion that personality traits are important due to their contribution of happy and stable attachments.<sup>19</sup>

It should be noted that the differences between females and males may not be considered very big. Out of 38 characteristics, ten of them reflected female male differences. These findings suggest that both sexes are more similar than different as it was suggested by some other researchers.<sup>20</sup>

Not surprisingly, mutual love was the most highly rated characteristic in our list. Early research established that western subjects marry for love. Also some cross cultural studies supported the Goode's<sup>21</sup> thesis that less traditional and more industrialized cultures place high importance on romantic love.<sup>22</sup> Likewise, in societies with dominant individualistic values and free mate choice possibilities, participants stressed more on the romantic love<sup>23</sup>. Despite that our sample is a member of eastern culture possibly from a collectivist background, the participants most highly rated on the item mutual love too. This may be

<sup>18</sup> Buss, *i.b.i.d.*, pp.1-49; Toro-Morn & Sprecher, *i.b.i.d.*, pp.151-170.

<sup>19</sup> Malouff, John M. - Thorsteinsson, Eina B. - Schutte, Nicola S. - Bhullar, Navjot - Rooke, Sally E., "The five Factor Model of Personality and Relationship Satisfaction of intimate Partners: A Meta Analysis", *Journal of Research in Personality*, 44(2010), pp.124-127.

<sup>20</sup> Buss, *i.b.i.d.*, pp.1-49; Goodwin, Robin, "Sex Differences Among Partner Preferences: Are the Sexes Really Very Similar?", *Sex Roles*, 23, (1990), pp.501-513.

<sup>21</sup> Goode, William J., "The theoretical importance of love", *American Sociological Review*, 24(1959), pp.38-47.

<sup>22</sup> Medora et al., *i.b.i.d.*, pp.155-178.

<sup>23</sup> Medora et al., *i.b.i.d.*, pp.155-178.

indicating to changing traditional values. On the other hand, we should note that the values can be considered traditional were also among highly rated mate characteristics. For example, kindness towards relatives, sexually faithfulness, willingness to have children. This seems to be supportive of the notion that modern and traditional values affecting mate preferences go hand in hand in some developing countries<sup>24</sup>.

With regard to gender differences, our findings are in line with previous research findings.<sup>25</sup> These studies indicated that men valued physical appearance (or good looks, youth) more while women valued financial security (capacity of earning more, wealth) more. Our study further supported the universality of male and female differences.<sup>26</sup> Female participants attached more importance to economical status of their preferred partner than do males. Male participants, on the other hand, value physical attractiveness more in their partner than do females.

#### Limitations of study

This study employed a convenience sample which holds questionable degree of representation of its larger culture. First of all, the data were collected only in Bishkek, capital city, which is located in a relatively more developed region. This might led to gathering of a less divergent sample, since in Kyrgyzstan, as a developing country, regional differences are profound. Secondly, the sample consists of university students only. In this case, young adults from other settings are not represented, so generalization ability of results is further limited. And also, social desirability, a common shortcoming of survey research, may have impact on the current research findings.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Goodwin, Robin, **Personal Relationships Across Cultures**, London, 1999.

<sup>25</sup> Hatfield – Sprecher, **i.b.i.d.**, pp.728-750; Ingoldsby et al., **i.b.i.d.**, pp.171-185; Khallad, **i.b.i.d.**, pp.155-168; Toro-Morn – Sprecher, **i.b.i.d.**, pp.151-170.

<sup>26</sup> Buss, **i.b.i.d.**, pp.1-49.

<sup>27</sup> Feingold, **i.b.i.d.**, pp.125-139.



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