Factor, factor, on the whole, who’s the best fitting of all?☆☆☆
Factors of mate preferences in a large sample

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ABSTRACT

The goal of the studies reported here was first to explore and confirm a factor structure of evaluations of actual and ideal partners as well as oneself, then validate the factors by testing classic hypotheses from evolutionary psychology on the factor means, and finally, to use the factors to predict self-perceived mate value and relationship satisfaction. Partner characteristics were empirically collected with open-ended questions and then rated by two large samples for actual and ideal partners as well as the self. Participants also filled in measures of self-perceived mate value and relationship satisfaction. A structure of seven correlated, first-order factors was confirmed by CFA. Factor means across sex and context were in line with evolutionary theories and previous findings about sex and context differences. Self-perceived mate value and relationship satisfaction were both predicted by factors of ratings in the respective context. However, different models emerged for mate value and satisfaction, respectively. While people evaluate actual and ideal partners as well as themselves as partners along the same factors, between-sex differences can be observed, and self-perception of mate value and relationship satisfaction seem to depend on different factors. Methodological and theoretical implications are elaborated.

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1. Introduction

Replication might be a bad idea for broken-up intimate relationships but a good one for scientific research. Especially for a topic like along what factors people evaluate actual and ideal partners, on which various studies have been done with inconsistent methods and results. The current ‘replication crisis’ in psychology (e.g., Open Science Collaboration, 2015) may serve as a caveat to previous research, particularly when it was done in a different cultural and linguistic context than yours.

A systematic and critical overview of 23 studies on the factors of mate preferences (see below and in the Supplementary material) reveals considerable variability concerning the results and the methods, including instruments as well as data analysis. Work by Garth O. Fletcher and his colleagues (e.g., Fletcher, Simpson, Thomas, & Giles, 1999) stands out of this literature because of its methodology (empirically generated items and confirmatory factor analysis) and because it was replicated several times. However, most of these replications used Anglo–Saxon samples (from New Zealand and the USA, respectively), and one must also consider that several other studies exist on this topic with different approaches.

While evolutionary psychology suggests that there are some universals as to what traits, characteristics, and dimensions people consider when they evaluate potential, actual, and ideal partners (Buss, 1998; Buss & Schmitt, 1993), there may be cultural and linguistic differences pertaining not only to the importance of these dimensions but their content as well (cf., Confer et al., 2010). This paper reports studies of mate preferences in a cultural and linguistic context, Hungary, from where such research has never been published before.

1.1. (Mis)measuring mate preferences

For three decades researchers have been trying to reveal the main dimensions of mating decisions by reducing mating-relevant characteristics with factor analysis. By asking participants to score the importance of partner traits, a decision making pattern can emerge that gives information about the ideals of mating. Although there are a large number of studies that deal with the underlying structure of mating decisions, the results as well as the methodological solutions are somewhat inconsistent, thus it is difficult to agree on the number of factors (e.g., Jonason, Webster, & Gesselman, 2013; Penke, Todd, Lenton, & Fasolo, 2007).

Different researchers used diverse contexts of measurement, e.g., some asked about long-term ideals (e.g., Buss & Barnes, 1986; Fletcher...
et al., 1999), some asked about otherwise unspecified ‘romantic partners’ (Simpson & Gangestad, 1992), others specifically about potential/probable marriage partners (Parmer, 1998; Shackelford, Schmitt, & Buss, 2005) or future spouses (Boxer, 2012), while some asked about the desirability of various characteristics (Furnham, 2009; Schwarz & Hassebrauck, 2012). Only a few articles did explicitly measure short-term preferences besides long-term ideals (Fletcher, Tither, O’Loughlin, Friesen, & Overall, 2004; Jonason et al., 2013; Regan, Levin, Sprecher, Christopher, & Cate, 2000; Rowatt, DeLue, Strickhouser, & Gonzalez, 2001), although it is widely accepted that short-term ideals differ from long-term preferences (Buss & Schmitt, 1993).

Another inconsistency concerns the construction of measurement instruments and the inclusion of items therein. Trait items were sometimes empirically developed (e.g., Fletcher et al., 1999), sometimes taken from previous research by others (e.g., Shackelford et al., 2005), took their 18 traits from a study done 60 years before by Hill, 1945). In some cases, the list was completed or developed based on theoretical considerations (e.g., Ellis, Simpson, & Campbell, 2002; Katsena & Dimdins, 2015). Sometimes the source or the process of item generation was not specified (e.g., Furnham, 2009), but there is also a case when even the rated items were not published (Gerdvilyte & Abhyankar, 2010). Instead of using items based on theory or taken from previous studies, empirically collected trait-lists may be more ecologically valid. Such items are easier for the participants to evaluate, since they are generated in the same cultural and temporal context, do not sound artificial (e.g., ‘emotional intelligence’, Furnham, 2009; ‘normality’, Neto, da Conceição Pinto, & Furnham, 2012), and do not contain professional language (e.g., ‘resilience’, Neto et al., 2012).

In some cases, sample sizes and the inclusion criteria of participants were also problematic. Some studies, especially the earlier ones had small samples either in absolute terms (e.g., Goodwin & Tang, 1991; Kenrick, Sadalla, Groth, & Trost, 1990) or relative to the number of items submitted to factor analysis (Buss & Barnes, 1986). Most of the samples consisted of university students, moreover, some of the studies did not consider or mention sexual orientation (e.g., Boxer, 2012), and thus their samples may contain non-heterosexual participants, although it is unclear how sexual orientation relates to the factor structure. In some studies, responses from cultures as different as the UK/US and China were pooled for analysis (Goodwin & Tang, 1991; Kline & Zhang, 2009).

Data analytical methods ranged from principal component analysis (PCA) with varimax rotation (especially in earlier studies, e.g., Kenrick et al., 1990, but even as late as Schwarz & Hassebrauck, 2012) to exploratory factor analysis (EFA) with either orthogonal or oblique rotations to confirmatory factor analysis (CFA; since Fletcher et al., 1999; see also Fletcher, Kerr, Li, & Valentine, 2014; Overall, Fletcher, & Simpson, 2006). For example, Katsena and Dimdins (2015) used principal axis factoring (PAF) with oblique rotation before proceeding to CFA; while Neto et al., 2012 used PAF with varimax rotation and no CFA. The number of the underlying factors was identified in various ways: sometimes based on the eigenvalues (e.g., Buss & Barnes, 1986), sometimes by parallel analysis (e.g., Atari & Jamali, 2016), and in less than half of the papers by CFA (e.g., Katsena & Dimdins, 2015). Some of the studies used parcelling on the items while performing CFA (e.g., Fletcher et al., 1999; Katsena & Dimdins, 2015), although parcelling is only reasonable in exceptional cases when the parcelled traits are a unidimensional phenomenon (cf., Little, Cunningham, Shahar, & Widaman, 2002). Factor labels were equivocal and diverse, varying from unidimensional one-word expressions to bipolar and complicated labels (e.g., Fletcher, Boyes, Overall, & Kavanagh, 2006; Shackelford et al., 2005).

Perhaps the most serious problem with some of the reported articles was the lack of essential details concerning the analysis or the investigation, e.g., the variance explained by PCA or exploratory factor analysis (EFA; e.g., Kenrick et al., 1990; Regan et al., 2000); the type of analysis or rotation (e.g., Parmer, 1998); or the extracted traits (Gerdvilyte & Abhyankar, 2010). Besides, of the 23 journal articles reviewed here, only nine used CFA to test their models of the factor structure of mate preferences. (See a structured and systematically tabulated overview in the Supplementary material.)

1.2. Overview of current research

The present study had two major goals. First, we wanted to see along which factors people rate actual and ideal partners. In this sense, this was a conceptual replication of several earlier studies, especially the one by Fletcher et al. (1999). The second goal was to see how these ratings differed across sex and context (long- vs short-term), how they correlated with relationship satisfaction, and how with the self-perception of mate value. Regarding the differences across sex and context, these are predicted by evolutionary theories (Buss & Schmitt, 1993; Trivers, 1972). The linkage between partner ratings and relationship satisfaction is predicted by the Ideal Standards Model (Fletcher et al., 1999). Concerning the self-perception of mate value, since our participants also rated themselves on the same traits, a measure of general mate value (the Mate Value Scale, MVS; Edlund & Sagari, 2014) was also expected to correlate with the factors of self-ratings.

To achieve the goals above, a Hungarian questionnaire was needed to measure partner evaluations. Since the composition of the item list may have a substantial influence on the resulting factor structure, items have to be selected carefully. If items are added on a theoretical basis, they may yield factors which are actually not that important for people when they evaluate prospective or actual partners. Theoretically constructed item lists, on the other hand, may also omit characteristics which could reflect important factors of mate preferences, but, as they are omitted, they do not even have a chance to be represented in the factor structure. Simply translating an existing trait list may also cause such problems. Thus, Study 1 was performed to empirically collect characteristics along which people could evaluate actual and ideal partners.

In Study 2, participants rated actual and ideal partners as well as themselves on the traits collected. Using a relatively large sample (N = 634) and, as a within-subject variable, four different rating contexts (actual partner, oneself, ideal long-term partner, ideal short-term partner) we could establish a factor structure of mate preferences which, with its seven correlated first-order factors was reliable across sex and context.

Although the fit of the factor model to the data was tested by CFA, Study 2 had still been exploratory in nature, and many of the items in the original list had to be discarded. Therefore, Study 3 was performed to replicate the findings on an independent, even larger sample (N = 1545). Good fit indices supported the model established in the previous study.

Finally, the samples of Studies 2 and 3 were pooled to conduct further analyses, which had two goals. First, we tested long-standing evolutionary hypotheses about sex differences in mate preferences across long- vs short-term contexts (Buss & Schmitt, 1993). Second, regression analyses were performed to see how partner ratings in different factors contribute to relationship satisfaction and how self-ratings on the same factors predict self-perceived mate value. Before proceeding to these analyses, measurement invariance was tested for, with scalar equivalence established across sex, metric across the four contexts, and partial scalar invariance across long- vs short-term ideal ratings.

2. Study 1

The goal of Study 1 was to determine a list of important and relevant characteristics along which people discriminate potential relationship partners in long- and short-term contexts. Laypeople’s expressions were collected without any theoretical bias. In this section, we adopted and expanded the methodology of Fletcher and his colleagues with adding a further relationship context (Fletcher et al., 1999).
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