

## Mate preferences among the Shuar of Ecuador: trait rankings and peer evaluations<sup>☆</sup>

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### Abstract

A large body of research has examined sex differences in mate preferences, but very little of such work has been conducted in small-scale societies. Study 1 explored women's and men's mate preferences within a modern hunter-horticulturalist population in Amazonian Ecuador. In contrast to patterns documented in much of the existing literature, women and men from three Shuar villages were nearly identical in their stated preferences for physical attractiveness and resource-related traits, and physical attractiveness was ranked at the bottom among 19 traits. Study 2 examined the relationship between unmarried Shuar participants' assessments of the personal characteristics of known peers and their assessments of those peers as desirable long-term partners. When assessed using this method, physical attractiveness appeared to weigh much more heavily into Shuar evaluations of partner desirability, and a sex difference emerged in the preference for resource-related traits. Overall, there were substantial differences between individuals' stated preferences and their preferences as revealed in peer ratings. Across both measurement techniques, however, Shuar women and men were very similar in their preferences for physical attractiveness. These results raise questions about the universality of sex differences in mate preferences documented in the existing literature.

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### 1. Evolutionary psychology and mate choice

#### 1.1. Evidence supports predictions derived from parental investment theory

Trivers' (1972) parental investment theory makes several predictions about mate choice that have been central to human evolutionary studies. First, because women's investment in offspring is more obligatory and direct than that of men (the physiological resources required for pregnancy and lactation versus the external resources of additional food, protection, and/or social resources), women will prefer characteristics

indicating a partner's ability to provide resources more than will men. Second, because women's reproductive value declines steeply over the life course, men will prefer cues indicating a woman's physical ability to reproduce—such as youth and beauty—more than will women (Symons, 1979). There is to date a great deal of evidence to support these predictions, including numerous studies documenting sex differences in preferences for these traits across many populations and using a variety of methods (Buss, 1989a, 1989b; Buss & Barnes, 1986; Buunk, Dijkstra, Fetchenhauer, & Kenrick, 2002; Hatfield & Sprecher, 1995; Khallad, 2005; Li, Bailey, Kenrick, & Linsenmeier, 2002; Lippa, 2007; Shackelford, Schmitt, & Buss, 2005; Stewart, Stinnett, & Rosenfeld, 2000; Zeh & Smith, 1985). In fact, so often has it been reported that men consider physical attractiveness more importantly in a long-term partner than do women and that women consider access to resources more importantly than do men that these sex differences are beginning to be treated as truisms (e.g., Greitemeyer, 2007; Koyama, McGain, & Hill, 2004; Wiederman & Allgeier, 1994).

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There are two important shortcomings of the literature on human mate preferences. First, although investigators have endeavored to collect data from many cultures, these data have been collected, by and large, from urban, middle-class, and often college-educated participants. Second, the data collected are almost entirely self-reports of preferences, hypothetical choices, or retrospective reports of the attractive qualities of a current partner, all of which are susceptible to self-report biases.

### 1.2. *Small-scale societies and mate choice*

The typical study participants in mate choice research live in cultural and ecological environments that are evolutionarily novel: They are engaged in wage labor, involved in local, national, and global markets, exposed to mass media, and reside in relatively large populations, all of which could contribute to the patterns of results that have been documented. In contrast, scholars have just begun to systematically examine mate preferences within small-scale societies with subsistence economies, despite the fact that such societies are thought to more closely approximate ancestral environments in which mate preference adaptations evolved.

Several factors likely to affect the expression of mate preferences may differ substantially between traditional and modernized societies. First, in environments in which contraception is rare and communities are small, the consequences of mating decisions are greater for both women and men than for those in larger societies in which sociosexual relationships need not lead to reproduction and people can cloak themselves in anonymity or move from one social group to another with relative ease (Boyd & Richerson, 1988; Panchanathan & Boyd, 2004). Women risk pregnancy, and poor mating choices may expose both women and men to severe societal stricture or negative reputational consequences impacting their future opportunities. Second, subsistence economies often rely on a strict sexual division of labor, resulting in interdependence of the sexes for the basic necessities of life (Bird, 1999; Brown, 1991). Third, in environments in which modern medical care is difficult to come by, pathogens are prevalent, and a person's ability to obtain resources is directly linked to his or her physical ability, natural immune functioning is of paramount importance to survival and the ability to successfully reproduce (Sugiyama, 2003).

One area of research that has highlighted the importance of testing evolutionary hypotheses of mate choice in small-scale societies is the preference for low female waist-to-hip ratio (WHR). Based on multiple studies conducted in industrialized nations (e.g., Furnham, Tan, & McManus, 1997; Henss, 1995; Singh, 1993), it was argued that the preference for a small WHR might be a human universal. However, studies among the Matsigenka of Peru (Yu & Shepard, 1998), the Hadza of Tanzania (Marlowe & Wetsman, 2001), the Shiwiar of Ecuador (Sugiyama, 2004), the Zulu of South Africa (Tovée, Swami, Furnham,

& Mangalparsad, 2006), and the Sámi of Scandinavia (Swami & Tovée, 2007) have all documented cultural differences suggesting that overall body mass may be more important than WHR in determining attractiveness among foraging peoples. The debate over the importance of WHR is unsettled (see, for example, Marlowe, Apicella, & Reed, 2005) but highlights the importance of local culture and ecology in shaping mate preferences.

In studies conducted in small-scale societies examining preferences among partner traits, the pattern of results is also quite different from that found in college or urban samples, particularly in relation to the importance placed on physical attractiveness. Among the Hadza of Tanzania, for example, Marlowe (2004) found that women cited foraging ability as an important quality in a partner more often than did men but that women and men named physical attractiveness as an important feature about equally. In a study using the Standard Cross-Cultural Sample, Moore and Cassidy (2007) found that whether women placed more importance on attractiveness or resources in a partner varied across populations and was predicted in part by the means by which women derived status within that culture; for example, when women derived status from their authority in the home, they placed relatively more emphasis on attractiveness and less on resources. Among the Aché of Paraguay, men reported that women place the greatest importance on a partner's hunting ability, but women themselves most commonly cited "handsome" and "kind" as the most important characteristics in a mate (Hill & Hurtado, 1996). In addition, although not investigated in small-scale societies, there is evidence that high pathogen prevalence—a common feature of small-scale societies—increases the importance of physical attractiveness in a potential mate (Gangestad, Hasleton, & Buss, 2006), particularly for women (Penton-Voak, Jacobson, & Trivers, 2004).

These studies of small-scale societies are tantalizing, but each of the studies to date is limited by the fact that preferences were assessed using only free response from participants. For example, Hill and Hurtado (1996) speculated that Aché women's shy and abbreviated statements about what is important to them in a partner are actually less accurate than men's thoughtful descriptions of what women find important. In Study 1, I attempted to address this shortcoming in the literature by conducting a systematic ranking task within a hunter-horticultural society in Amazonian Ecuador.

### 1.3. *Behavioral measures and mate choice*

The second shortcoming of the mate preference literature is heavy reliance on self-reports of hypothetical preferences or retrospective reports of initial attraction to a current partner (e.g., Campbell, Simpson, Kashy, & Fletcher, 2001; Shackelford et al., 2005). These studies tell us what people *say* is important in a partner, but there is little evidence to suggest that people's subjective preferences accurately reflect those traits that actually attract them to a potential

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