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Indian mate preferences: Continuity, sex differences, and cultural change across a quarter of a century

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ABSTRACT

Expressed mate preferences provide unique windows into evolved mating psychology. The current study used two research instruments—one ranking and one rating procedure—to examine mate preferences in India. We compared modern Indians ($n = 536$) with a more modest Indian sample studied a quarter of a century earlier ($n = 105$) to test the hypothesis that sex-specific mate preferences—as hypothesized by parental investment theory—would persist during this time period. Mate preferences for mutual attraction and love remained important and invariant over time, despite India's history of arranged marriages. Sex differences in mate preferences for cues to *fertility* (youth, physical attractiveness) and *resources* (good financial prospects, social status) remained relatively invariant over time. Several changes in mate preferences emerged, including a greater preference for mates who are “creative and artistic,” “ambitious and industrious,” and “a good cook and housekeeper” for both sexes. Despite cultural changes in India over the past 25 years, evolved mate preferences have persisted during this time period. Discussion highlights limitations of this research.

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1. Introduction

Mate preferences are important in several contexts. First, mate preferences influence who is chosen and who is excluded from mating, influencing the direction of sexual selection (Darwin, 1871). Second, mate preferences determine which potential mates are considered to be high and low in mate value. Mate value, in turn, influences the desirability of the mate one can attract (Buss, 2003). Third, some mate preferences are produced by evolved psychological adaptations, solutions to adaptive problems such as choosing a mate who is fertile or who is willing and able to invest in offspring (Buss, 1989). Fourth, mate preferences influence which mate attraction tactics are effective—tactics that embody qualities desired by the individual someone is trying to attract (Buss & Shackelford, 1997; Schmitt & Buss, 1996). Fifth, mate preferences provide a window into cultural values. When examined over time, changes in mate preferences can be used to assay the evolution of cultural values (Buss, Shackelford, Kirkpatrick, & Larsen, 2001; Lei, Wang, Shackelford, & Buss, 2011). For these reasons, the study of mate preferences is an important, ongoing endeavor.

Parental investment theory has been used to generate hypotheses regarding sex-specific mate preferences (Trivers, 1972). Because fertility cannot be observed directly, evolutionary psychologists hypothesized and found that men (more than women) value physical appearance in a mate because appearance provides a wealth of observable cues to fertility (Buss, 1989; Symons, 1979). Because female fertility declines more sharply with age, evolutionary psychologists hypothesized and found that men (more than women) have preferences for young mates (Symons, 1979). Women (more than men) must invest more resources in their offspring (e.g., nine months of pregnancy). Thus, evolutionary psychologists hypothesized and found that women (more than men) have preferences for mates who are able to acquire resources and who are willing to invest resources in them. These sex differences are hypothesized to be universal across cultures (e.g., Badahdah & Tiemann, 2005; Buss, 1989; Khallad, 2005; Lei et al., 2011).

India is interesting for studying mate preferences. According to Heitzman and Worden (1995), “In India there is no greater event in a family than a wedding, dramatically evoking every possible social obligation, kinship bond, traditional value, impassioned sentiment, and economic resource”. Marriage patterns in India have changed dramatically over the past 25 years. Traditionally, marriages in India have been managed by parents through arranged marriages

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(Banerjee, Duflo, Ghatak, & Lafortune, 2009). In contrast, modern Indians now exert more influence regarding whom they marry. This trend is pronounced among India's educated and middle class, which by one estimate will include 256 million people by the years 2015–2016 (<http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/indiaatlse/2012/10/01/marriage-in-modern-india-the-middle-class-ideal-of-an-indian-marriage-has-not-changed-henrike-donner/>).

A key question is whether evolved mate preferences among Indians have persisted over the past quarter century, given these cultural changes. We hypothesize that, despite these cultural changes, sex-specific mate preferences hypothesized and identified from parental investment theory would persist over this time period. The current study also seeks to contribute preliminary knowledge about cultural evolution. Thus, we also compare expressed mate preferences of a sample of Indians a quarter of a century ago to those expressed by a sample of modern Indians.

These questions must be addressed with caution because India is a culturally diverse country. First, diverse religious traditions include Hindu, Buddhism, Muslim, Christianity, and dozens of others. Second, some regions of India encourage marriage to blood relatives such as cousins, whereas other regions discourage marriage to blood relatives (Heitzman & Worden, 1995). Third, marriage patterns vary from urban to rural, and across traditional Indian castes (Banerjee et al., 2009). Thus, the current research must be interpreted with caution when generalizing these results to the Indian population. Nonetheless, the current study provides a unique and unprecedented opportunity to compare expressed mate preferences of a sample of Indians a quarter of a century ago to those expressed by a sample of modern Indians.

2. Method

2.1. Participants

This research consisted of a 1984 Indian sample and a 2009 Indian sample. For the 1984 sample (56 males, 44 females), we used data from the 37-Culture International Mate Selection Project (see Buss, 1989; Buss et al., 1990). For the 2009 sample, participants (275 males, 261 females) were drawn from Karnatak University in Dharwad, Karnataka state, India. Participation was not rewarded.

2.2. Materials and procedures

Participants from both samples completed the English version of the Mate Preference Scale (Buss, 1989; Buss et al., 1990), which is comprised of two sections. The first section is a ranking procedure in which participants received the following instructions:

Below are listed a set of characteristics that might be present in a potential mate or marriage partner. Please rank them on their desirability in someone you might marry. Give a "1" to the most desirable characteristic in a potential mate; a "2" to the second most desirable characteristic in a potential mate; a "3" to the third most desirable characteristic; and so on down to "13" for the 13th most desired characteristic in a potential mate. Rank These 13 Characteristics From Most (1) to Least (13) Desired in a Mate." Following these instructions were 13 characteristics derived from a previous factor analysis of a larger set of 76 characteristics (see Buss & Barnes, 1986).

In the second section, participants reported their age, sex, the age at which the participant preferred to marry, and the age differences they preferred between themselves and their spouse. Participants then rated 18 mate qualities on a 0–3 scale (0 = *irrelevant or unimportant*, 1 = *desirable, but not very important*, 2 = *important, but not indispensable*, 3 = *indispensable*).

3. Results

3.1. Age and mate preferences in a partner

Table 1 shows the participant's ages, ages at which they preferred to marry, and age difference preferred between themselves and their spouse. Participants from the 2009 sample were younger than participants from the 1984 sample by 1.65 years for males and by 0.66 years for females.

In the 1984 sample, the age at which participants preferred to marry differed significantly between men (27.30 years) and women (23.04 years). We documented a similar sex difference in the 2009 sample (men: 28.34 years; women: 25.29 years). These sex differences are consistent with those documented across several other cultures (Buss, 1989; Lei et al., 2011).

Consistent with the hypothesis that men have an evolved preference for young, fertile partners, men from both our samples reported a preference for a spouse who was younger than themselves (1984: 4.50 years; 2009: 3.92 years). Indian women preferred spouses who were older than themselves—4.19 and 3.33 years older for the 1984 and 2009 samples, respectively. These sex differences represent large effect sizes, with *ds* of 4.28 and 4.34. These are among the largest sex differences documented in the psychological literature (see, e.g., Geary, 2009).

3.2. Validity check for the expressed age difference between self and spouse

Mate preferences cannot be invariantly translated into actual mating decisions. Individuals cannot always get what they want. They are limited by their own personal mate value and by the pool of available mates (Buss, 2003; Buss & Schmitt, 1993). Nonetheless, mate preferences cannot have evolved unless they influenced actual mating behavior during the time period during which they evolved.

One validity check on preferred age differences between self and spouse involves examining the actual ages at which men and women marry. Indian demographic data from 1982 (the closest in time to our 1984 sample that we could locate) reveal that the average age at first marriage for women was 19.3, whereas the average age at first marriage for men was 24.0 (http://www.medindia.net/health_statistics/general/marriageage.asp). Indian brides were approximately 4.70 years younger, on average, than Indian grooms in 1982. These demographic data correspond well to men's and women's expressed preferences for age differences between themselves and their mate (in 1984, men preferred their brides to be 4.50 years younger, and women preferred grooms to be 4.19 years older). Thus, mate preferences correspond to actual age differences at marriage, providing validity for these measures of expressed mate preferences.

In 2011, the average Indian marriage age increased to 22.2 years for women and to 26.0 years for men (http://www.medindia.net/health_statistics/general/marriageage.asp), or roughly 3.80 years difference between brides and grooms. This also corresponds well to the expressed preferences for age differences between self and mate in our 2009 sample: Men reported preferring a mate who is 3.92 years younger than themselves, and women reported preferring a mate who is 3.33 years older than themselves. In short, expressed age preferences for Indian brides and grooms correspond well to actual age differences at first marriage, providing validity for the measure of expressed age of mate preferences.

A cultural change in both age preferences and actual age at marriage is noteworthy. Both sexes, but especially women, preferred to marry a few years older in 2009 than in 1984. Paralleling this cultural shift, the actual ages at which Indian women and men married shifted to a few years older.

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