

Original Article

# Hypothetical rankings of prospective husbands for female kin in lowland Nicaragua: consensus analysis indicates high agreement and associations with wealth and hunting skill<sup>☆</sup>

Jeremy Koster\*

*Department of Anthropology, University of Cincinnati, Cincinnati, OH 45221-0380, USA*

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## Abstract

In preindustrial societies, kin may exert influence on the mating choices of women, but there have been few systematic studies of the preferred characteristics of husbands for female kin. In an indigenous Mayangna and Miskito community, photographs of 29 male household heads were presented to informants, who ranked the men on three characteristics: desirability as a spouse, hunting ability and wealth. For the desirability rankings, informants were asked to consider the advice that they would give to young female relatives and rank the men based on the qualities that such women should seek in a husband. Consensus analysis indicates that there is high agreement among informants on all three sets of rankings. There is no evidence that the age and sex of informants are associated with variation in evaluations of the desirability of men, which suggests that the evaluations by reproductively active women do not significantly differ from rankings by other informants. Multivariate analysis indicates that perceptions of both a man's wealth and his hunting ability are positively associated with his desirability as a prospective husband for female kin. By contrast, a strong kin-based social network, as measured by the presence of consanguineal kin in the community, seems unimportant to a man's desirability as a husband. Although it remains unclear to what extent hunting ability is a signal of phenotypic quality, these results support predictions that individuals will encourage female kin to marry men who are good resource providers. Finally, compared to a conventional reliability analysis, consensus analysis is demonstrated as a superior method for assessing both unidimensionality and subgroup variation in informant rankings.

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## 1. Introduction

Much of the pioneering evolutionary research on mating preferences is based on studies conducted in industrialized nations (Buss, 1989). As predicted by parental investment theory (Trivers, 1972; see also Kokko & Jennions, 2008), these studies indicate that females place greater emphasis than males on the ability of their spouses to acquire resources (Shackelford, Schmitt, & Buss, 2005). To investigate the

cross-cultural reliability of this apparent difference, a few ethnographers have conducted studies of mating preferences in small-scale, preindustrial societies. There is evidence that Hadza women desire skilled hunters as husbands, for example (Marlowe, 2004). In Amazonian Ecuador, attractiveness rankings of Quichua and Achuar men show positive correlations with hunting ability and social status after controlling for the effects of age (Escasa, Gray, & Patton, 2010). Among the Shuar, peer evaluations indicate that both men and women value a good personality and physical attractiveness in their potential mates, but only women consider the merits of prospective partners as providers (Pillsworth, 2008).

The design of these studies provides insight into the unconstrained mating preferences of females. In many small-scale societies, however, parents and other family members exert considerable influence on the mate choices of women (Apostolou, 2007; see also Faulkner & Schaller, 2007). There

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\* Corresponding author. Tel.: +1 513 556 0020; fax: +1 513 556 2778.  
E-mail address: jeremy.koster@uc.edu.

is probably considerable agreement between women and their kin about the desired characteristics of prospective husbands. Although women may exhibit relatively stronger preferences for heritable physical traits (Buunk, Park, & Dubbs, 2008), both women and their kin should prefer men with the traits needed to support the woman and her offspring. From the perspective of the woman's kin, paternal investment by the husband may relieve their need to support the woman and her offspring. There can also be direct benefits when kin receive resources from the woman's husband.

The importance of a prospective husband's wealth, industriousness, character and family background is a recurring theme in the ethnographic literature on parental influence on female mate choice in small-scale societies (Apostolou, 2010). Yet, few ethnographers have specifically investigated the preferences of a woman's kin. As a result, there is little quantitative evidence that kin prioritize resource-related traits over other characteristics of possible suitors, and cross-cultural reviews such as Apostolou's (2010) must therefore rely on anecdotal ethnographic reports, which typically offer little indication that the reported preferences are representative of the entire population. This study addresses that gap in the literature by using peer rankings of male household heads to investigate preferences for prospective affinal kin among indigenous horticulturalists in lowland Nicaragua. This research uses consensus analysis to assess patterns of agreement among informants, specifically testing for differences related to the age and sex of the informants. Additional tests examine the relationships between the aggregated desirability rankings and other measures of resource provisioning and kin-based cooperation.

## 2. Study site

The lowland tropical forest of Honduras and Nicaragua is known as the Mosquitia. Located in the center of the Mosquitia in northern Nicaragua, the Bosawas Reserve is inhabited by two indigenous groups, the Mayangna and the Miskito (Stocks, 2003). Although the language and ethnicity of the Mayangna and Miskito remain distinct, there is considerable acculturation and intermarriage between the two groups, especially along the tributaries of the Rio Coco. The indigenous societies have also adopted some Western norms via exposure to European missionaries and the mestizo populations surrounding the reserve (Stocks, 1996).

The Mayangna and Miskito are swidden horticulturalists whose major crops include bananas, plantains, manioc, yams, corn, rice and beans. Although women contribute to horticultural production by planting and harvesting grain crops, they allocate relatively little time to horticulture compared to women in other indigenous Neotropical societies (Hames, 1989). Hunting and fishing, which provide much of the protein in the diet, are also primarily male-oriented activities (Koster, 2008b). Hunters use dogs and

caliber rifles, and common prey types include agoutis, pacas, nine-banded armadillos, collared peccaries, white-lipped peccaries and tapirs (Koster, 2008a). Fishing returns peak in the dry season (January–May), when the clear water allows men to use the bow and arrow, lures and SCUBA masks and crossbows (Koster, 2007). During the rainy season, both males and females typically use fishhooks. The Mayangna and Miskito also keep livestock, including cattle, pigs and fowl. Beef is rarely consumed, however, because households keep cattle primarily for sale during times of economic need. Although barter and trade are common, the indigenous communities frequently use Nicaraguan currency. A few adults hold jobs as schoolteachers, including a female preschool teacher, but occasional wage labor and panning for gold represent the leading sources of income for most households. Compared to men, women devote less time to moneymaking activities, including gold panning, and therefore they are largely reliant on their husbands' earnings for cash-related purchases (Koster, 2007).

The indigenous societies of the Mosquitia have been described as tolerant of casual sex among young adults (McSweeney, 2002). Yet, although females in their early teenage years are considered marriageable, there is a clear expectation that sexual activity by a young woman should be restricted to long-term relationships in which her partner is co-residing and contributing to household chores and subsistence labor (e.g., agricultural work). The Mayangna and Miskito are vigilant about the budding relationships of their female kin, who typically begin their first long-term relationship in their late teenage years. The initial stages of courtship occur in a public setting, as male suitors seek opportunities to converse with women, usually on the porches of their homes. A teenage female's relatives, especially parents, aunts and uncles, can often be overheard discussing these courtships, and possible interventions are openly discussed when they disapprove. If a man surreptitiously continues a courtship following an intervention, then verbal disputes and violent threats that embroil the respective extended families may ensue upon the discovery of his actions.

Adolescent females who have never been married usually reside with their mothers and, by extension, either their fathers or stepfathers. When a prospective husband expresses an interest in a relationship with the young woman, she may invite him to move into her household if her parents consent. Prior to initiating a conjugal relationship with the woman, the man may spend multiple weeks in the household while often assisting other male household members with subsistence tasks. Broad public recognition of the relationship generally occurs once the woman is pregnant. It is common for young couples to form an independent household only when the woman is pregnant with a second child. Descent is traced bilaterally, and there are no clearly established postmarital residence rules (von Houwald, 2003), but couples typically build their houses near either partner's parents.

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