Article

Desirable Attributes in the Ideal Partner: Can they Vary According to Gender and Place of Residence?

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Abstract

Comprehending the choice of romantic partner is important in order to minimize possible problems stemming from conflictive loving relationships. This study aimed to identify to what extent the preference for desirable attributes in an ideal partner vary according to the respondent's gender and place of residence. A total of 3,124 people from capital cities ($n = 1,583$) or towns ($n = 1,541$) of the nine states of the Brazilian Northeast region participated in the study, with a mean age of 23.6 years ($sd = 6.72$) and 63.6% female. They answered the Desirable Attributes of the Ideal Partner Scale and demographic questions. Results (Manova) indicated differences in the desirable attributes in an ideal partner according to gender: the men gave greater importance to the *athletic* dimension, while the women scored higher in the *accomplished* dimension. An effect was also observed related to the place of residence, with the men living in towns presenting a higher mean score in the *traditional* dimension, whereas the women residing in this locality gave more importance to the *athletic* dimension. In conclusion, the place of residence and, above all, the gender were important in explaining the variations in preferences for attributes in an ideal partner, in agreement with the literature.

Keywords: Desirable attributes, ideal partner, gender, place of residence.

Atributos Desejáveis de Parceiro Ideal: Podem Variar Segundo o Sexo e o Lugar de Residência?

Resumo

Compreender a escolha por parceiros amorosos é relevante no sentido de minimizar possíveis problemas decorrentes de relacionamentos conflituosos. Este estudo objetivou conhecer em que medida a preferência por atributos desejáveis de um parceiro ideal varia segundo o sexo e o local de residência das pessoas. Participaram do estudo 3.124 indivíduos residentes em capitais ($n = 1.583$) ou cidades do interior ($n = 1.541$) dos nove estados do Nordeste brasileiro, com idade média de 23,6 anos ($dp = 6,72$), sendo 63,6% do sexo feminino. Estes responderam a Escala de Atributos Desejáveis do Parceiro Ideal e perguntas demográficas. Os resultados (Manova) mostraram diferenças nos atributos desejáveis de um parceiro ideal segundo o sexo: os homens deram maior importância ao componente *atlética*, enquanto as mulheres pontuaram mais alto no componente *realizada*. Observou-se ainda efeito do lugar de residência, onde os homens residentes no *interior* apresentaram maior média no atributo *tradicional*, ao passo que as mulheres residindo nesta localidade deram mais importância ao atributo *realizada*. Concluiu-se que o lugar de residência e, sobretudo, o sexo foram importantes para explicar as variações na preferência por atributos de um parceiro ideal, na direção prevista na literatura.

Palavras-chave: Atributos desejáveis, parceiro ideal, sexo, lugar de residência.

Desirable Attributes in the Ideal Partner: Can they Vary According to Gender and Place
of Residence?

1237

Atributos Deseables de la Pareja Ideal: ¿Pueden Variar Según el Sexo y el Lugar de Residencia?

Resumen

Comprender la selección de parejas sentimentales es importante para minimizar los problemas potenciales que surgen de las relaciones románticas en conflicto. El objetivo de este estudio ha sido conocer en qué medida la preferencia por los atributos deseables de una pareja ideal varía según el sexo y el lugar de residencia de las personas. Participaron de la investigación 3.124 personas residiendo en la capital ($n = 1.583$) o ciudades del interior ($n = 1.541$) de los nueve estados del Noreste de Brasil, con una edad promedia de 23.6 años ($de = 6.72$), (63.6% mujeres). Éstos contestaron a la Escala de Atributos Deseables de una Pareja Ideal y cuestiones demográficas. Los resultados (Manova) indicaron diferencias en los atributos deseables de una pareja ideal según el sexo: los varones han dado mayor importancia al componente *atlético*, mientras que las mujeres puntuaron más alto en el componente *realizada*. También se ha observado efecto del lugar de residencia, en que los varones residentes en el interior dieron mayor importancia al atributo *tradicional*, mientras que las mujeres residiendo en esta localidad consideraron más importante el atributo *atlético*. Se concluyó que el lugar de residencia y, sobre todo, el sexo han sido importantes para explicar las variaciones en las preferencias por atributos de una pareja ideal, coherente con la literatura.

Palabras clave: Atributos deseables, pareja ideal, sexo, lugar de residencia.

Despite a decrease in the number of marriages in recent years (from 49.4% in 2000 to 42.9% in 2010), people are not moving away from having companions, as there was also an increase in domestic partnerships (from 28.9% in 2000 to 36.4% in 2010; *Instituto Brasileiro de Geografia e Estatística* [IBGE], 2010). However, coupled with the increase in domestic partnerships, there has also been an increase in the number of divorces in recent years in Brazil, from 1.7% in 2000 to 3.1% in 2010, some of which were non-consensual (litigious), in which it was usually the woman that requested it, claiming betrayal as one of the main causes. More recent data indicate a 161.4% increase in divorces over one decade, from 130,500 (2004) to 341,100 (2014; IBGE, 2014). Such data suggest that intimate relationships occupy a prominent place in people's lives, with problems related to conjugality becoming increasingly evident. This may be due to legal provisions that have made marriage and divorce less bureaucratic, or due to affection having gained a prominent role in the maintenance or dissolution of these relationships (Ferraz, Leite, & Leite, 2011).

Barbosa (2008) highlighted that, among the diversity of patients who seek psychotherapeutic help, there are often direct or indirect reports of difficulties associated with relationships with the other person, with romantic love and with sexuality. It must be emphasized that love is not an invention of Western society, since people of all cultures have the chance to experience this feeling and attribute specific words to it, indicating that love, with its key components of commitment, intimacy and passion, is inevitable in the human experience and is within the reach of all (Andrade, 2011; Buss, 2003; Cassepp-Borges, 2010; Gouveia, Carvalho, Santos, & Almeida, 2013; Sternberg & Weis, 2006). It can be said then that motivation or sexual interest (or even company) can be the first steps towards the beginning of a loving relationship, highlighting the relevance of this theme.

This subject has attracted the attention of researchers of diverse areas, such as Sociology, Anthropology and Biology, being in the scope of Psychology, especially Evolutionary Psychology (e.g., Buss, 1989, 2003, 2007; Castro & Lopes, 2011; Kamble, Shackelford, Pham, & Buss, 2014; Perilloux, Fleischman, & Buss, 2011; Sbruzzi, 2009) and Social Psychology (e.g., Furnham, 2009; Little, Jones, DeBruine, & Caldwell, 2011; Myers, 2005). In general, these

researchers sought explanations for how people choose their partners, based on a variety of variables, such as genetics, personality traits, religion, political ideology, and schooling.

In view of the above, understanding how loving relationships are configured has been one of the interests in Psychology. Particularly, attempts have been made to identify the process of choosing a partner, that is, what people look for in the other with whom they intend to maintain a loving relationship. Buss (1989, 2003) has been trying to answer this question for two decades, with his research consisting of identifying whether, in fact, people's choices of their partners are a product of human evolution, with it being more likely to identify similar findings regarding intimate relationships in different countries. One of his most cited studies on partner selection was conducted in 37 countries, aiming to identify the differences between the sexes in the preferences that guide the human sexual relationship, considering evolutionary concepts of parental investment, sexual selection, reproductive capacity and sexual asymmetries (Buss, 1989). In Brazil, this author identified that men gave more importance to good appearance, while women accentuated sociability as a more desirable characteristic in the partner.

It is important to comprehend intimate relationships between people, especially seeking to identify how individuals choose their partners. This can influence many facets of life, such as work, study and leisure. In this direction, a literature search was performed aiming to identify studies carried out in this area. In the international context, by introducing the term "desirable attributes" in the APA PsycNET™ database, 22 texts were found. However, only four referred directly to desirable attributes in a partner. A new search was performed considering the term "romantic partner", which produced 35 publications, 13 of which dealt specifically with romantic relationships. In the national context, using the same terms in Portuguese (i.e., *atributos desejáveis* and *parceiro romântico*) in the PEPSIC database, only one text with a similar theme appeared (Guedes & Asunción, 2006). The same search in SciELO revealed nine texts, however,

only one was of interest, which evaluated the relationship between desirable partner attributes and human values (Gouveia et al., 2010). Finally, conducting the search in Google Scholar, with the same terms, 80 publications were identified, however, only one was related to the topic, this being a duplicate of the one previously cited.

In conclusion, these findings indicate that in the Brazilian context there are still few studies regarding the attributes of the ideal partner in romantic relationships (Castro & Lopes, 2011; Gomes, 2011; Gouveia et al., 2010), although some can be found that consider the strategies men and women employ to choose their partners (Castro, Hattori, & Lopes, 2012), expectations related to desirable partners (Castro, Hattori, Yamamoto, & Lopes, 2013), partner ideation (Hattori, Castro, & Lopes, 2013) and social perception with the romantic partner (Castro, Hattori, Yamamoto, & Lopes, 2014; Mafra, Castro, & Lopes, 2015; Mafra & Lopes, 2014). However, as previously noted, it may be useful to identify what people prefer about the attributes they consider to be ideal in their partners, and whether these preferences have some relation to the gender of the person choosing or evaluating the partner.

Gender Differences and Desirable Attributes in the Ideal Partner

The explanation for the differences between men and women can be found in the evolutionary past, when both lived specific roles (Buss, 2003). Thus, the pressures exerted by selection may not have been the same on either sex. This led to the evolution of various types of affective and cognitive specialization, because what was convenient for one gender might not be for the other. Allied to biological aspects, social and cultural issues have also been relevant in determining the behavioral patterns that men and women began to adopt in life in society throughout the ages. Therefore, it is assumed that men and women differ in their way of thinking, feeling and behaving, which, presumably, influences the preference and choice of a partner with whom one intends to maintain a loving relationship. Thus, it is important to recognize that there

is a relationship between gender and attributes of an ideal partner (Burriss, Welling, & Puts, 2011; Meltzer, McNulty, Jackson, & Karney, 2014).

In Trivers's (1972) *parental investment model*, preferences for a partner would be affected by reproductive biology, focusing on the investment made in the offspring. Women, having a limited number of offspring, tend to invest more in each of them, choosing partners with the capacity for gathering resources who can maximize the chances of their offspring surviving. On the other hand, men, who can potentially impregnate a large number of women at the same time, mainly consider visual signs (e.g., youth, physical attractiveness), which may indicate the ability to reproduce. In the course of evolution men have shown more interest in the variety of sexual partners than women, ensuring greater dissemination of their genes (Kokko & Jennions, 2012).

In this sense, Feingold (1992) did a search for studies with this theme, using the keywords "mate selection", "dating" and "interpersonal attraction" and then compared the results of men and women in the preferences given in relation to some desirable attributes measured both from studies with questionnaires and through analysis of the content of personal advertisements. The results indicated that women rated attributes such as *socioeconomic status* and *ambition* higher than men. However, no differences were found between the sexes regarding the preference for characteristics unrelated to the survival of offspring, such as, for example, *sense of humor* and *personality*.

Similarly, Buss (2007) identified that, for long-term relationships, the woman chooses the partner who demonstrates more resources to invest in her and her children, as well as one who has the ability to protect them physically and that shows potential for being a good parent. Corroborating these findings in the Brazilian reality, Silva et al. (2005) conducted a study in the state of Rio de Janeiro with 225 women aged between 31 and 60 years, mostly married or cohabiting, aiming to identify the attributes they considered important for an ideal partner. Among the attributes that the women did not consider important were *physical appearance* and *sexual inter-*

course. The most important attributes included being *good-natured*, *sincere*, *faithful*, and *conversant*, followed by, although to a lesser extent, the partner being *understanding*, *caring*, *intelligent*, *hardworking*, *sharing household chores*, and *having a social life*. There is also evidence that women of today, especially those working in the labor market, are more demanding with regard to male behavior, whether in the social, affective, sexual or professional areas (Perlin & Diniz, 2005).

There are, however, characteristics or attributes that seem to be common to both sexes in searching for a partner, such as *kindness*, *intelligence*, *understanding*, *gentleness*, and *emotional stability* (Buss, 2003; Verweij, Burri, & Zietsch, 2014). In general, it is estimated that such attributes can act as positive predictors for dealing with children in the face of danger, adapted socialization practices and the ability to perceive change, which would be evolved characteristics of what might be considered to be a good partner.

Based on the perspective of social learning, Little et al. (2011) indicated that partner preferences can be generalized in a given population, suggesting that certain attributes may become desirable for people of a particular group, so that they would "copy" the preferences of individuals who demonstrate high social status. Buss, Shackelford, Kirkpatrick, and Larsen (2001), seeking to verify changes in the attributes desirable in a partner over the years, found that for men and women there seems to have been an overall increase from 1939 to 1996 in the assessment of *mutual attraction*, *love*, *education*, *intelligence*, *sociability* and *good looks*. In contrast, there was a general decrease in the assessment of *refinement*, *cleanliness*, and *chastity*, regardless of the gender of those who chose.

Buss et al. (2001) further indicated that, in addition to changes occurring for both sexes, some generational changes appeared to have been unique to a particular gender. Furthermore, for men there was an overall increase in valorization of an *educational formation* similar to their own and of a good *financial situation* perspective, while there was a global decrease

in the evaluation of *good cook* and *housewife*. On the other hand, for the women there was a global decrease in the assessment of *ambition* and *diligence*. However, there was convergence between the men and women in their ordering of the importance of different *mate qualities* over the previous three decades. In spite of these changes, men from 1939-1996 placed more importance than women on *physically attractive* partners, and women indicated more importance than men in partners with *good financial prospects*, with these gender differences seeming to transcend cultures and generations (Buss, 1989). Stability of gender differences, coupled with the relative convergence between the sexes in companion preferences in the middle of the last century, suggests the value of an interactionist approach that contemplates evolutionary and cultural factors.

Desirable Attributes in the Ideal Partner in Northeast Brazil

One way to understand differences between national and regional cultures is to consider the orientations of cultural variation, such as individualism and collectivism (Hofstede, 1984; Triandis, 1995). According to Gouveia and Clemente (2000), *individualism* describes a type of orientation in which, in the interpersonal scope, individuals are considered as discrete, autonomous, self-reliant and respectful of the rights of others. These authors add that, from the social point of view, such individuals are conceived as abstract and universal entities; their status and roles are defined by their successes (e.g., educational, economic) and their interaction with others is based on rational principles, such as equality and fairness (justice). These authors describe *collectivism* as emphasizing the common good and social harmony above individual interests; with each person encouraged to put the interests of the group ahead of their own. In relation to social aspects, duties and obligations are prescribed by roles, where individuals lose prestige if they fail to fulfill them, with the social order maintained when each person fulfills their roles and duties. Institutions are an extension of the family, with legal paternalism and moralism

(i.e., institutionalized moral values) being imperatives.

In individualistic cultures, people with similar goals take part in their respective groups. In these contexts, each person is encouraged to be autonomous, self-directed, unique and assertive, and to value intimacy and freedom of choice. Conversely, in collectivist cultures, people are encouraged to suppress some of their individualistic and hedonistic desires. As a result, interdependence, social support, common destiny and compliance are some of their most important aspects. As a whole, that is, in terms of region, the Northeast is evidently more collectivist than individualist (Gouveia & Clemente, 2000; Hofstede, De Hilal, Malvezzi, Tanure, & Vinken, 2010). However, it is estimated that there is also some internal variation; People living in urban areas are more individualistic, while those living in rural areas are more collectivistic (Hofstede, 1984, 1991; Triandis, 1995), and these variations of types of orientation may have an impact on the attributes that are appreciated in an ideal partner.

Some studies related to the desirable attributes of an ideal partner have been carried out in the Brazilian Northeast. For example, Gouveia et al. (2010), with a sample from the general population (*n*=421) of João Pessoa (Paraiba), with an mean age of 25 years, verified that women value the *social* dimension more in choosing a partner, while men appreciated *physical appearance* more. Similarly, also with a sample of the capital of Paraiba (*n*=205), Gomes (2011) verified that the men gave more emphasis to the *athletic* dimension and the women to those denominated as *affectionate* and *hard working*. Therefore, the men prioritized the reproductive capacity of the potential partner, while the women appreciated attributes of family orientation, as well as those that referred to the possibility of gain, resources and material goods (Buss, 2003, 2007; Gouveia et al., 2010).

The studies about the choice of the ideal partner in the Brazilian Northeast have been carried out in the same city, this being the capital city, with no study comparing residents of capital cities with those of the towns of the state,

which motivated the present study. The main aim was to identify what attributes men and women prioritize in an ideal partner and whether their choices vary according to their place of residence (capital city or town), considering people from the Northeast. Based on the aims described above, some hypotheses regarding differences between men and women in the choice of partner were formulated:

Hypothesis 1. Men and women will differ in the importance attached to the desirable attributes of the ideal partner.

Hypothesis 1.1. Men will attach more importance than women to attributes that highlight the physical and reproductive qualities (*athletic* dimension) of their ideal partner.

Hypothesis 1.2. Women will attach more importance than men to attributes that highlight social qualities (*affective* dimension) of their ideal partner.

Hypothesis 1.3. Women will attach more importance than men to attributes that highlight possibilities of gain, resources, and material goods (*accomplished* dimension) of their ideal partner.

Hypothesis 1.4. Men of the towns will give more importance to attributes that portray more traditional aspects (*traditional* dimension) of their ideal partner than those of the capitals cities.

Hypothesis 1.5. Women of the towns will attach more importance to attributes that highlight possibilities of gain, resources, and material goods (*accomplished* dimension) of their ideal partner than the women of the capital cities.

Method

Sample

A total of 3,124 people from all Northeastern Brazilian states participated in this study, 10.6% from Alagoas, 10.0% from Bahia, 12.1% from Ceará, 10.8% from Maranhão, 12.7% from Paraíba, 11.3% from Piauí, 11.0% from Pernambuco, 10.0% of Rio Grande do Norte and 11.5% from Sergipe. This included residents of capital cities [*n*=1,583 (50.7%)] and of towns of the states [*n*=1,541 (49.3%)] and their ages ranged from 18 to 73 years (*m*=23.6, *sd*=6.72). Only

those who declared themselves to be heterosexual were considered, with the majority being female (63.6%) and university students (83.4%), 53.9% of whom said they were in a steady relationship (dating, engaged, married Or cohabiting) at the time the study was performed. It was therefore a convenience sample (non-probabilistic), with the participation of the people invited, who agreed to participate.

Instruments

The participants responded to a booklet containing demographic questions (age, place of residence, occupation, sexual orientation, sex and relationship status) and three instruments that were part of a larger research project, among which the one that was the focus of this study: *Desirable Attributes of the Ideal Partner Scale.* This scale was designed by Gouveia, Gonçalves, Gomes, Freires, and Coelho (2014) and is composed of 20 attributes that describe a person with whom one intends to have a life in common. Each item represents an attribute, answered on a five-point scale, ranging from 1 (Not important) to 5 (Extremely important). By means of exploratory and confirmatory factor analyzes, Gouveia et al. (2014) observed that these attributes were grouped into five components (Cronbach's alpha and attributes in parentheses): affection (α = 0.80; caring, good character, kind and companionable), traditional (α = 0.61; from a good family, sensitive, homely, faithful), *athletic* (α = 0.80; sexy, healthy, good shape, beautiful), *social* (α = 0.68; attentive, determined, tolerant and gentle) and *accomplished* (α = 0.60, studious, educated, successful and decided).

Procedure

Firstly, researchers from different Northeastern states, residents or working in state towns or capital cities, most of them teachers of public and/or private higher education institutions, were contacted and asked to collaborate with the data collection[1].

After their acceptance, the questionnaires were sent through the post, including the instructions for the collection, which could be done in the classroom with the individual participation of the respondents. All were informed of the anonymous and voluntary nature of their collaboration in the study and they needed to previously sign the consent form that stated the aims of the project and that they could leave the study at any moment without penalty. Ethical procedures for research with human subjects were followed, according to Resolution 466/12 of the National Health Council (approved under CEP/HULW No. 257/10). On average, 15 minutes were sufficient to complete the study participation.

Data Analysis

Data were tabulated and analyzed using the PASW (version 18) program. In addition to descriptive statistics (mean, standard deviation and frequency) for characterization of the participants, multivariate analyzes of variance (Manova) was performed to identify the effects of the gender and place of residence of the participants on the dimensions of desirable attributes in the ideal partner.

Results

Initially, an attempt was made to verify differences between men and women regarding the importance of the desirable attributes in the ideal partner. A Manova was performed, considering gender as the antecedent variable and the dimensions of desirable attributes in the ideal partner as the criterion. The results of this analysis corroborated the variability in the scores of the participants regarding the prioritized attributes, according to their gender [Wilks' lambda = 0.84; $F(5, 3,111) = 122.44$, $p < .001$; $n^2 = 0.16$]. Details related to this are presented in Table 1 below.

Table 1
Gender and Desirable Attributes in the Partner in the Brazilian Northeast

| | Groups | | | | | | | |
| | Men | | Women | | | | | |
Attributes	m	sd	m	sd	F	df	p	d
Affectionate	4.5	0.48	4.7	0.40	48.60	1/3,117	.001	0.25
Sociable	4.2	0.56	4.3	0.51	45.85	1/3,117	.001	0.24
Traditional	3.5	0.69	3.7	0.64	14.65	1/3,117	.001	0.14
Accomplished	3.7	0.68	3.8	0.62	38.72	1/3,117	.001	0.22
Athletic	3.3	0.84	2.7	0.83	346.85	1/3,117	.001	0.69

According to Table 1, the men only presented a higher mean ($m = 3.3$, $sd = 0.84$) than the women ($m = 2.7$, $sd = 0.83$) in the *athletic* dimension, which depicts physical attributes of the partner [$F(1, 3,116) = 346.86$, $p < .001$]. Regarding the *accomplished* dimension, women scored higher ($m = 3.8$, $sd = 0.62$) than men ($m = 3.7$, $sd = 0.59$) [$F(1, 3,116) = 38.72$, $p < .001$]. This pattern was also observed when women were compared with men in the *affectionate* [$F(1, 3,116) = 48.60$, $p < .001$], *sociable* [$F(1, 3,116) = 45.84$, $p < .001$] and *traditional* [$F(1, 3,116) = 14.65$, $p < .001$] dimensions.

Although the difference between men and women in prioritizing the attributes they saw as desirable in an ideal partner seemed clear, the responses of the respondents based on their place of residence still needed to be considered. In this case, a Manova was performed, having the dimensions of the attributes of the partner (affectionate, athletic, accomplished, sociable and traditional) as the dependent variables and

Desirable Attributes in the Ideal Partner: Can they Vary According to Gender and Place
of Residence?

1243

the gender and place of residence (capital cities and towns of the Northeast) as the independent variables. The results indicated a multivariate effect for the gender and place in which the participants resided [Wilks' *lambda* = 0.01; F (5, 3,110) = 74,471.51, p <.001; η^2 = 0.99), with the details presented in Table 2 below.

Table 2
Desirable Attributes in the Partner according to Sex and the Place of Residence

	Capital					Towns							
	M		W			M		W					
Attributes	*m*	*sd*	*m*	*sd*	*d*	*m*	*sd*	*m*	*sd*	*d*	*F*	*df*	*n²*
Affectionate	4.5	0.50	4.7	0.38	0.34	4.6	0.45	4.7	0.41	0.17	48.60*	1/3,117	0.015
Sociable	4.1	0.58	4.3	0.50	0.36	4.2	0.53	4.3	0.52	0.14	45.85*	1/3,117	0.015
Traditional	3.5	0.67	3.6	0.64	0.25	3.6	0.67	3.7	0.64	0.04	14.65*	1/3,117	0.005
Accomplished	3.6	0.65	3.8	0.60	0.30	3.7	0.69	3.8	0.63	0.15	38.72*	1/3,117	0.012
Athletic	3.2	0.81	2.6	0.79	0.74	3.3	0.81	2.8	0.86	0.68	346.85*	1/3,117	0.100

Note. M = Men; W = Women.
* p <.001.

Concerning the *affective* dimension, it was verified that the women of the capital cities (m = 4.7, sd = 0.01) and the towns (m = 4.7, sd = 0.01) scored more than the men of the capital (m = 4.5, sd = 0.02) and the towns (m = 4.6, sd = 0.02) [F (1, 3,113) = 5.90, p <.05]. Similar findings were found for the *sociable* dimension, highlighting that the women, regardless of place of residence [capital city (m = 4.3, sd = 0.02) and towns (m = 4.3, sd = 0.02)], scored more than the men [capital (m = 4.1, sd = 0.02) and towns (m = 4.2, sd = 0.02)] [F (1, 3,113) = 9.17, p <.05].

Regarding the *traditional* dimension, the men and women of the towns and the women of the capital cities scored higher than the men of the capital cities [F (1, 3,113) = 7.34, p <.01]. In the case of the *accomplished* dimension, the women in both the capital cities and the towns presented higher means than the men in the capital cities and the towns [F (1, 3,113) = 3.73, p <.05]. Therefore, regardless of their place of residence, the women scored attributes of this dimension higher than the men. Finally, in relation to the *athletic* dimension, no differences were found according to the gender and place of residence of the participants [F (1, 3,113) = 0.64, p = .42].

Discussion

In general, men and women were expected to differ in relation to the desirable attributes in the partner, which did occur, corroborating Hypothesis 1. This indicates that the preference for some attributes of what would make an ideal partner is influenced by the gender of the respondent (Buss, 1989, 2003; Gomes, 2011; Gouveia et al., 2010; Silva et al., 2005; Silva, Menezes, & Lopes, 2010). These differences may reflect strategies that have evolved over generations, but also indicate the social roles that men and women have in society (Perlin & Diniz, 2005). For example, the fact that the women gave more emphasis to the dimensions of *affectionate* and *sociable* attributes seems to reflect the emphasis they place on social orientation, evidencing empathetic reasoning, with more concerned for others than the men (Baron-Cohen, 2004).

It was estimated that in the Northeast region the women would be more interested in partners who portrayed affectivity and resource possibilities than the men (Hypotheses 1.2 and 1.3; Gomes, Gouveia, Silva, Coutinho, & Santos, 2013), consistent with studies in various contexts (Buss, 1989; Buss & Barnes, 1986; Hat-

field & Sprecher, 1996). However, men were expected to present a higher mean than women in attributes that portrayed a person with good physical appearance, the results agreeing with this, corroborating Hypothesis 1.1. Specifically, men gave preference to partners who demonstrate greater physical attractiveness and youthfulness, which may be indicative of their reproductive capacity (Buss, 1989, 2003; Gouveia et al., 2010; Hatfield & Sprecher, 1996).

Considering the differences between the men and women living in the towns of the states and those in the capital cities of Northeast Brazil, it was expected that the women living in the towns would present a higher mean in relation to attributes related to survival and economic stability than those living in the capital cities, reflecting the *hypothesis of scarcity* (Inglehart, 1990), which seems more prevalent in the towns of this region. Although the participation of women in the labor market has increased in towns or small cities, it still appears to be less than that among women residing in larger cities or capital cities (IBGE, 2010). According to the latest census of the IBGE, conducted in 2010, more than 30 million economically active women, that is, aged 16 or over, live in urban areas, a figure that is six times higher than those living in rural areas (around 5 million). This could lead to women with fewer resources seeking a partner with higher socioeconomic status (Sbruzzi, 2009). However, in the present study, no differences were found between women from the towns and those from the capital cities, which does not confirm Hypothesis 1.5, although they presented a higher mean in this dimension than the men, which is consistent with the literature (Buss, 1989, 2003).

These results may suggest that, regardless of the social context and/or the financial dependence that women present, the search for a partner with resource possibilities is recurrent among them. This may be explained by the fact that women have more investment in the offspring, which makes it important to have a successful partner; for example, they consider it relevant to choose a partner who can commit and help them care for their children, even if they already have

the financial resources to do so (Buss, 1989; Feingold, 1992; Li & Kenrick, 2006). There is also evidence that women in the contemporary world, especially those working in the labor market, are more demanding with regard to the partner (Perlin & Diniz, 2005).

In relation to the men, there was no difference between residents in the capital cities and those in the towns regarding the dimension related to *physical appearance*, however there was in relation to the dimension that portrays attributes of *tradition*. These findings suggest that, regardless of where men reside (i.e. capital cities or towns), their scores are high in the *athletic* dimension, consistent with the findings of evolutionary psychology, which highlights men's search for young, healthy-looking women, which may be indicative of greater reproductive capacity, increasing the perpetuation of their genes (Buss, 1989, 2003). It should also be noted that social-based explanations indicate that men seek attractive women to reinforce their status and power, demonstrating their ability to attract valuable partners (Michener, DeLamater, & Myers, 2005; Sibley, Wilson, & Duckitt, 2007).

Male residents of the towns presented a higher mean in the *traditional* dimension than male residents of the capital cities, confirming Hypothesis 1.4. This difference can be explained by characteristics of gender relations, perhaps evidence of greater machismo in cultures of honor, such as in the Northeast (Gouveia, Guerra, Carvalho, Sousa, & Souza, 2013), especially in the towns, where men may see women as more submissive or performing pre-determined roles. Therefore, it is possible that the men choose partners that have more traditional attributes, valuing characteristics such as "good wife", that is, a homely woman from a good family woman (Johannesen-Schmidt & Eagly, 2002; Travaglia, Overall, & Sibley, 2009), which also reinforces the collectivism characteristic of this region (Hofstede et al., 2010), emphasizing the attachment of the people to social norms and standards defined by their ancestors (Gouveia & Clemente, 2000).

Although this study achieved its main aims, it also presents potential limitations. For example,

the sample was not random or representative of the Brazilian population or even that of the Northeast, since it considered university students, who are only part the inhabitants of the region. However, the number of participants seemed sufficient for the statistical analyses carried out, and the findings described were generally consistent with what has been observed in the literature (Buss, 1989, 2003; Buss & Schimitt, 1993; Castro & Lopes, 2011; Kenrich, Sadalla, Groth, & Trost, 1990; Silva et al., 2010).

The results of this study contribute to the knowledge in the area of intimate relationships. In addition, it favors thinking of potential practical applications. For example, in the context of Clinical Psychology, where there are recurring complaints about conflicting romantic relationships (Barbosa, 2008), it is imperative to identify the partner selection process in order to minimize the effects of a poorly thought out choice. This is because, according to the principle of homogamy in which the partners generally prefer in the other what they value in themselves (Buston & Emlen, 2003), the therapeutic process can help people to better understand their choices and thus avoid conflicts and frustrations arising from unsuccessful choices.

The results of this study may also be useful for marriage agencies, since it is important to rely on scientifically grounded knowledge to maximize the chances of choosing a more compatible partner (i.e. sharing beliefs, opinions, likes and dislikes), indicating the desire that people have to establish cognitive coherence (Michener et al., 2005), with the importance of similarity in loving relationships having been identified in some studies (Buss, 1989; Doosje, Rojahn, & Fischer, 1999; Figueredo, Sefcek, & Jones, 2006; Furnham, 2009; Silva et al., 2010). In addition, it also seems relevant to have measures of love styles (Cassepp-Borges, 2010).

Finally, further studies should be considered. For example, it seems important to identify to what extent values and personality traits can contribute to explain the choice of the ideal partner (Gomes, 2011; Gonçalves, 2012; Gouveia et al., 2010). It is also relevant to know whether this choice can differ among those who

were already married and divorced or became widowed. In these cases, people might have different life plans when choosing a partner for the second marriage, especially if they already had children, which could influence their choice of the new spouse (Gouveia, Vione, Milfont, & Fischer, 2015). It would also be useful to know the partner choice in the context of polyamor and virtual relationships; and, finally, to replicate the present study in other regions of the country, evaluating the vicissitudes of the choices in different cultures.

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