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### **Evolutionary vs. Sociocultural Perspectives on Human Mate Selection: The Role of Women's Academic Achievement on Their Need for Financial Stability**

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EVOLUTIONARY VS. SOCIOCULTURAL PERSPECTIVES ON HUMAN  
MATE SELECTION: THE ROLE OF WOMEN'S ACADEMIC  
ACHIEVEMENT ON THEIR NEED FOR FINANCIAL STABILITY

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By

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**Abstract**

Recent research suggests that the sociocultural perspective has become more prominent than the previously accepted evolutionary perspective of human mate selection (Wood, 1999; Tooby & Cosmides, 1992). Today's women have higher educational attainment and overall higher achievement levels than in the past (Blank & Bansal, 2011; Osava, 2010). The purpose of the current study is to determine if college women exhibit more of a sociocultural or evolutionary approach to their mate selection preferences. Approximately 109 female undergraduates completed the Relationship Preferences Questionnaire, on which they rated 10 attributes of a potential mate on a 6-point scale. Participants' ACT scores and cumulative grade point averages provided measures of aptitude and achievement, respectively. Results of targeted variables showed no significant results associated with academic achievement levels. However compared to past findings, these results support a sociocultural theory of mate selection in women.

*Keywords:* academic achievement, aptitude, evolutionary perspective, mate preferences, sociocultural perspective

Evolutionary vs. Sociocultural Perspectives on Human Mate Selection: The Role of Women's Academic Achievement on Their Need for Financial Stability

Evolutionary deliberations of mate choice date back to Charles Darwin (1871), who proposed that all living species were derived from common ancestors. The primary mechanism to explain this fact was natural selection: a nonrandom process by which organisms less well adapted to their environment, or “less fit,” would become extinct at a greater rate than those better adapted. However, Darwin became dissatisfied with natural selection as the sole mechanism for evolutionary change. He suggested the concept of sexual selection: that such traits might evolve in organisms if they are sexually selected—if they increase the individual's reproductive success. Darwin noted that sexual selection is dependent on the struggle between males for access to females. His concept included two closely related processes: intrasexual selection, or the competition between members of the same sex for access to mates of the opposite sex, and intersexual selection, where members of one sex (generally females) choose members of the opposite sex (Brennan, 2010).

Sexual selection, the aspect of evolutionary theory that has been applied most comprehensively to sex differences in humans, embraces the evolutionary notion that because women represent the sex that allocates greater effort to parental investment, they are a limited reproductive resource for men, who are considered to be the sex with less investment. Men therefore compete for access to women and women make their mate selection from among the available men (Eagly & Wood, 1999).

Consistent with the notion of differential investment, women are more likely to choose mates who can provide resources to support their parenting efforts. Their primary reproductive

constraint is securing resources for offspring (Buss, 1988). This evolutionary pattern suggests that men will value those characteristics in women that provide prevailing cues to the women's reproductive value. Because the lost opportunities in mating with less fertile or less reproductively valuable women—especially in mating systems that require prolonged courtship and discourage multiple mating—can be costly, men are expected to exercise choice (Buss, 1988). Therefore, women should compete with one another to display those characteristics that men are seeking in a mate—those attributes associated with female reproductive value.

With statistics among undergraduate college students supporting hypothesized tactics, Buss (1988), confirmed his hypothesis that men use tactics of intrasexual mate competition involving resource possession and display more frequently than women. Buss's results correspond to the sex differences in expressed mate selection criteria: men prefer a mate who is physically attractive more than women, and women prefer a mate having good financial prospects or whose earning power seems to be high (Buss, 1987). In his study of sex differences in mate selection preferences, Buss and Barnes (1986) also found that in relation to men, women preferred the characteristics of dependable, good earning capacity, and career-oriented, whereas men preferred the characteristic of physically attractive. Furthermore, results showed that women more than men valued the characteristic of professional status.

A number of studies have yielded similar results. Toro-Morn and Sprecher (2003) found that men expressed a stronger preference than women on the items of physically attractive and sexy-looking, whereas women expressed a stronger preference than men for a partner with high earning potential and who is wealthy. Similar findings can be observed across numerous studies involving the evolutionary concept of mate selection.

Evolutionary theorists suggest that men prefer physical attractiveness in women because it is associated with reproductive capacity, whereas women are assumed to desire a mate who can provide resources for them and their offspring (Buss, 1988; Toro-Morn & Sprecher, 2003). According to this perspective, because females and males differ in their investments for resources in their offspring, they should also hold different values regarding characteristics in a mate. Men invest indirect resources such as food and protection, and women invest direct resources such as their own bodily nutrients to bear children. It is therefore assumed that men and women will be attentive to potential partners who have the potential of providing such specific resources, with women being more attentive to characteristics related to resource attainment such as dominance, and men being more attentive to characteristics indicating reproductive potential such as physical attractiveness (Buss, 1988).

Although the evolutionary view of human mate selection preferences—with numerous findings and supporting the proposed ideas—is a reliable theory, a contrasting theory addresses the mate selection preference differently. As more researchers have begun to acknowledge that some aspects of social behavior, personality, and abilities are different for men and women, their attention has shifted to the causes of these differences. Social psychological theories that emphasize social structure exemplify this approach (e.g., Archer, 1996; Buss, 1995b; Buss & Kenrick, 1998).

In contrast to evolutionary theory, where the causal arrow points from evolutionary adaptations to psychological sex difference, social structural theory suggests that the casual arrow points from social structure to psychological differences. Because men and women generally engage in different social roles, they become psychologically different in ways that are consistent with these roles (Eagly & Wood, 1999). Although evolutionary psychologists acknowledge the

principle that environmental conditions can influence the development as well as expression of evolved dispositions, they have failed to give attention to the variation of sex differences in response to cultural influences.

The sociocultural perspective suggests human behavior is influenced by social context, environmental cues, and cultural influences. From this perspective, the engine of sex-differentiated behavior is a society's division of labor between the two sexes because it compresses the social constraints under which men and women carry out their lives. These sex differences are viewed as adaptations to the different restrictions and opportunities that a society holds for its men and women (Eagly & Wood, 1999). According to Eagly and Wood, in western societies, the emphasis on status and power in men and physical attractiveness in women might be related to women's relatively lower socioeconomic status (SES) and that if women were given more opportunities and greater wages than allotted in the past, women would be less likely to prefer a man with higher SES. Furthermore, because culture has a direct influence on developmental experiences, culture is therefore important to the manifestation of adaptive mechanisms (Tooby & Cosmides, 1992). Thus, sex-differentiated behavior can be traced to the differing roles men and women have acquired within society, such as their educational and labor force roles.

Until the last century, women's participation in the labor force was limited by traditional cultural, educational, and even legal practices. Prior to this time, women's roles were generally restricted to duties within the home (i.e., housekeeping, cooking, and raising children). Over the past few decades however, the women's labor force throughout the United States as well as worldwide has encountered many changes, with women's educational attainment and labor force

participation and rates being significantly higher than they were in the 1970s (Blank & Bansal, 2011; Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2011; Osava, 2010).

From the growth of young women's job expectations came higher education attainment for women (i.e., college degrees). According to the U.S Department of Commerce and Statistics Administration (Blank & Bansal, 2011), the percentage of women aged 25-34 who have at least a college degree has tripled since 1968. The U.S Department of Labor (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2011) confirmed this trend with evidence that in 1970, 22.1% of women in the civilian labor force had either attended some college or graduated with a degree; by 2010, that figure had increased over three-fold to 66.7%.

Women not only began to gain access to higher education with college degrees, but they also began to outnumber men in college. The National Bureau of Economic Research confirmed that in 2003, there were 1.35 women for every man who graduated from a 4-year college and 1.3 women for every male undergraduate (Francis, 2012). According to the Bureau, these numbers contrast with 1960, when there were 1.6 men for every woman graduating from a U.S 4 year college and 1.55 men for every female undergraduate.

The U.S Department of Commerce and Statistics Administration confirmed that women aged 25-34 are now more likely than men of that age group to have attained a college degree, reversing the norm of 40 years ago (Blank & Bansal, 2011). In 2007-2008, women earned about 57% of all college degrees, with 57% of total undergraduate enrollment also being women.

Why the switch in women outnumbering men in college? One possible reason could be that the rise in divorce rates since the 1960s and women's greater responsibility for children have prompted women to see an investment in college as an insurance policy for their future financial lives (Francis, 2012).



The age of female college graduates' first marriage is another factor in the gender shift, with an increase of about 2.5 years in the 1970s (Francis, 2012). Furthermore, during this gender shift, young women's expectations for their future labor force participation changed drastically. Rather than following in their mothers' footsteps, more women aimed at having careers and not just jobs. And in contrast from the norm previously established for women, these careers were often outside of the traditionally female occupations for women. For example, when the college graduates of 1980 reached 30-to-34 years of age, 70% were employed, with only 36% of those women being teachers (Francis, 2012). According to Goldin, Kats, and Kuziemko (2006), about 30-60% of the increase in the female-to-male ratios of college graduates from the 1970s to the 1990s can be explained by these changes. From the growth of expectations for future careers, significant increases seen in women's enrollment in higher education, and outnumbering percentages of women compared to men enrolled in college, it can be inferred that women have begun to attain greater academic achievement levels than seen in the past.

The structural powerless hypothesis proposed by Buss and Barnes (1986) supports this inference with the premise that the importance of men's economic resources should diminish as women gain greater personal access to such resources. Stanik and Ellsworth's study on college women's mate preferences validates this hypothesis where they found that the higher the women's intelligence scores, the less they desired traits in a mate associated with the ability to provide financially. Their findings also revealed a negative relationship between women's intelligence and how much they adhered to traditional gender ideology (Stanik & Ellsworth, 2010). These findings confirm that for women with access to education and career opportunities, level of academic achievement makes a difference in what they look for in a man.

Although the evolutionary perspective suggests that gender differences in mate selection will persist according to the observed pattern (despite changing social conditions), the sociocultural perspective opposes this suggestion with the consideration that gender differences in mate selection preferences could narrow in the next 2 decades with increased egalitarianism in heterosexual relationships as young men and women are socialized to value the same traits and are presented with equal opportunities in the larger social structure (Spreecher, Sullivan, & Hatfield, 1994).

Thus, women have begun to “turn the tables,” and engage themselves in higher-standing social roles. From the increasing numbers of women attending college, to the numbers of women holding prestigious and high-ranking jobs, it can be inferred that women’s major role in life has changed from finding a man with the ability to provide, to independently providing for themselves. Women are no longer wholly dependent on men to provide for them financially because as the numbers reveal, women have taken these “male roles,” previously defined by the evolutionary perspective, and turned them into “female roles” as well—supporting the sociocultural perspective.

With greater academic achievement levels, thus changing social roles, it may be that women are steering away from the evolutionary perspective of seeking a mate with stable financial ability and towards the perspective of sociocultural theories. The sociocultural perspective has also become more prominent in current society, with women enrolling in higher education and engaging in different gender as well as labor roles.

With the changes noted in respect to society and women, there is evidence that women’s mate selection preferences have begun to reflect more of a sociocultural perspective. As women

achieve higher levels of education, they may be less likely to prefer a mate with greater financial prospect.

In regard to these two contradicting theories of evolution, the purpose of the current study was to determine if undergraduate college women exhibit more of a sociocultural or evolutionary theory perspective in regard to their dependency on finding a mate. More specifically, it was to determine if women in college, with their high achievement levels and available resources, are less dependent on men to provide for them as they once were because they feel they will one day be able to provide for themselves independently, without the aid of their mate.

It was hypothesized that undergraduate women, having greater academic achievement, would be less dependent on a potential mate with financial stability and the means to one day provide for them, and it was therefore assumed that college women would exhibit a greater sociocultural association to the perspectives on human mate selection.

## **Method**

### **Participants**

A sample of 110 female college students aged 18-25 ( $M= 20.08$ ,  $SD= 2.09$ ) attending Eastern Illinois University participated in the study. Both men and women participated in the study, however; only women's results were assessed and used in the study. All participants—including those from introductory psychology courses—received a small amount of extra credit for their participation in the study. Age is relevant to the current study for two reasons: (1) as women increase in age, they may have a better sense of understanding of what is important to them in a mate, and (2), as they progress through college they may become more aware of their ability and the range of salary they can expect to make in the future (Stanik & Ellsworth, 2010).

**Materials**

The main dependent variable in the study is the importance each female student placed on seeking a mate with good earning capacity (i.e., a man's income and ability to provide financially). To examine this variable, we used a questionnaire similar to the one used by Hill (1945), titled the Relationship Preference Questionnaire (RPQ) with updated long-term mate preferences. Participants rated each of the 9 attributes according to how much they desired the attribute in a potential mate using a 7-point scale from 0 to 6, with 0 being not important at all and 6 being completely necessary. The list of attributes included: high income/financial provider, physically attractive, intelligent, sense of humor, friendly/social, romantic, responsible, interesting personality, creativity, and special talents—with high income/financial provider as the attribute of primary interest.

**Procedure**

Cumulative grade point averages (GPA) and composite ACT scores served as the main measurements of academic achievement and aptitude levels and are the main predictor variables in the study. The measurements of GPAs and ACT scores were suitable because these measures reflect the students' achievement in college thus far as well as their desire to obtain their desired degree and one-day produce a sufficient salary. Upon compliance with a release form, the faculty sponsor obtained participants' GPAs and ACT scores through the University's database and the sponsor transmitted the academic information to the researcher using an identification number. After completion of consent forms, participants completed the RPQ and upon completion, the researcher debriefed the participants and thanked them for their time.

### **Results**

To test for mate preference differences between high and low aptitude and academic achievement levels, we used a median split. With a median of 20 for the composite ACT scores, the high aptitude group consisted of those women with ACT scores above 20, and the low group consisted of those with scores below 20. For academic achievement, the median of GPA averages was 3.135, and accordingly, the high academic achievement group consisted of those with GPA 3.14 and above, whereas the low group consisted of those with GPA 3.13 and below. Multiple t tests with GPAs and ACT scores serving as the independent variables revealed no significant differences in the ratings of the attribute of high income. Correlations between the 9 attributes and participants' ACT scores and GPAs also revealed no significant relationships. Table 1 shows the means, standard deviations, and rankings of the 9 attributes in order from highest to lowest (most important to least important).

### **Discussion**

The results show that there were no significant differences between high achieving and high aptitude women and low achieving and low aptitude women in their preferences for high income in a potential mate. Thus, the hypothesis was not supported. Similarly, the results show that achievement and aptitude in women are unrelated to their mate preferences concerning financial stability.

These findings do not support the sociocultural perspective on human mate selection. As the findings reveal, college women who have greater access to economic resources through education and the labor force do not show a change in their preference for a mate with high income. These findings suggest that human behavior or women's mate preferences are not influenced by social context and social labor roles within a society.

The major limitation of the study is that the sample was comprised mainly of high-achieving women. The mean GPA of the participants is 3.08, which on a 4.0 scale, is quite high. Similarly, the mean ACT score of the participants is 20.86, which again, is a fairly high score on the ACT and is not a general average for ACT scores. These figures indicate that as a group, the participants are relatively high on achievement and aptitude levels. This limitation may have attributed to nonsignificant differences between the two groups.

Although the results are not consistent with the sociocultural perspective, rank-order results may be consistent with this perspective. As Table 1 shows, the attribute of high income/financial provider was ranked 8 out of 9 on the list of possible attributes in a potential mate. This low ranking by primarily high achieving women indicates that these women prefer other attributes in a potential mate. However, to assess and confirm this consistency, future research regarding female's mate preferences and the sociocultural perspective must be done.

Findings from past studies of college women's mate preferences may also give reason for further research on the sociocultural perspective. The rank order of preferred characteristics found by Wakil (1973), show that good financial prospects ranked 7 out of 14 attributes. And Buss and Barnes's (1986) found that college women ranked "high earning capacity" 9 out of 13 on a list of preferences in a potential mate.

Along with the rank-order results from the current study, these past findings reveal a slight trend in differences in ranking for the attribute of high income across decades. As noted, the rankings of high income slightly decrease across time—1973, 7/14 (50th percentile); 1986, 9/13 (69th percentile); and 2013, 8/9 (89th percentile)—showing womens' decreasing preference for a mate with good financial prospects. This trend in differences suggests that the sociocultural perspective may be becoming more prominent in today's society. To examine this notion, it may

be useful to study “true” high and low groups of achievement and aptitude—high and low achieving women—rather than primarily high groups or high achieving women as was done in the current study. However, as the findings from the current study show, additional research is needed to determine if the sociocultural perspective is exhibited more than the evolutionary perspective in women’s mate preferences concerning financial stability.

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Table 1

*Descriptive Statistics for College Women's Mate Preferences*


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Rank	Characteristic	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	N
1	Sense of Humor/Funny	5.60	.68	110
2	Interesting Personality	5.44	.75	110
3	Responsible	5.41	.80	110
4	Friendly/Social	5.34	.87	110
5	Intelligent	5.10	.79	110
6	Romantic	4.71	1.02	110
7	Physically Attractive	4.60	.91	110
8	High Income/Financial Provider	4.04	1.29	110
9	Creative/Artistic	3.45	1.51	110
-	Cumulative GPA	3.08	.62	108
-	Composite ACT score	20.86	3.38	101