Every person is alive because of a successful mating. People in the past who failed to mate are not our ancestors. But how do we choose our mates? What characteristics do we seek? And why?

Social scientists have long assumed that our mate preferences are highly culture-bound—that people in North America, for example, desire different characteristics than people in Asia or Africa. Even Charles Darwin, a pioneering scientist on the topic of mating, believed that mate preferences were largely arbitrary. But little scientific knowledge has been gathered about what we want in a mate. Until recently.

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These findings, involving more than 10,000 people in 37 cultures on six continents and five islands, were extraordinarily difficult to obtain. In South Africa, the data collection was described as "a rather frightening experience" due to political turmoil and violence in shanty-towns. Government committees hindered data collection in some countries, and banned the study entirely in others. Revolutions and mail strikes prevented some collected data to be sent. It took us more than five years to gather all the information, and two years to perform the needed statistical analyses. But it was worth the wait.

We did find some striking differences across cultures, as scientists and common lore had long suspected. But we found apparently universal preferences as well—things that people worldwide expressed a desire for. And we found a few key differences between men and women in all cultures—universal differences that appear to be deeply rooted in the evolutionary history of our species. This chapter summarizes a few of the most important findings.

**UNIVERSAL MATE PREFERENCES SHARED BY MEN AND WOMEN**

We asked people to tell us how desirable 32 characteristics were in a potential marriage partner. We used two instruments. The first was a rating instrument, where subjects indicated how important each of 18 characteristics was on a scale ranging from "0" (irrelevant or unimportant) to "3" (indispensable). The second instrument requested subjects to rank each of 13 characteristics from "1" (most desirable) to "13" (least desirable).

When we analyzed the data for each of the 37 cultures, we found that people in nearly every culture agreed about which were the top few most
desirable characteristics. Not only was there agreement across cultures on the top few, men and women were statistically identical in nearly all of the 37 cultures on these most valued attributes. Everywhere, both men and women wanted a mate who was kind and understanding, intelligent, and was healthy (ranking instrument). Universally, as shown by the rating instrument, both men and women wanted a mate who possessed emotional stability and maturity, dependability, a pleasing disposition, and good health (see Table 1).

What about love? Many scientists believe that love is a Western notion, invented just a few hundred years ago. Our findings show those scientists to be wrong. People the world over value mutual attraction and love. Love is not merely something seen in Western Europe or even the Western world. Love is just as highly prized by the Chinese, Indonesians, Zambians, Nigerians, Iranians, and Palestinians. At least with respect to these characteristics, people everywhere have roughly the same desires. Our scientific theories need revision. At least some mate preferences are not as culture-bound as we had thought.

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<th>Universally Preferred Characteristics—Ranking Instrument</th>
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<tr>
<td>1. Kind and Understanding</td>
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<td>2. Intelligent</td>
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<td>3. Exciting Personality</td>
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<td>4. Healthy</td>
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<th>Universally Preferred Characteristics—Rating Instrument</th>
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<tr>
<td>1. Mutual Attraction—Love</td>
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<td>2. Emotionally Stable and Mature</td>
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<td>4. Good Health</td>
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<td>5. Pleasing Disposition</td>
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CULTURALLY VARIABLE MATE PREFERENCES

But it's not that simple. Not all characteristics showed uniformity across cultures. Indeed, for a few characteristics, what people desired in potential mates varied tremendously across cultures. Chastity—the lack of previous sexual intercourse—proved to be the characteristic most variable across culture (see Figure 1). This surprised our research team.

We expected that men worldwide would value chastity, and would value it more than women. This is because of the differences between men and women in the certainty of their parenthood. Women are 100 percent certain that they are the mothers of their children. But men can never be entirely sure that they are the fathers. Over thousands of generations of human evolutionary history, this sex-linked adaptive problem should have imposed selection pressure on men to prefer mates for whom their paternity probability would be increased. Valuing chastity might have been one way that men could be more "confident" that they were the fathers. We found that not all men feel that way.

We were surprised that men and women from the Netherlands, for example, don't care about chastity at all. Neither is virginity valued much in the Scandinavian countries such as Sweden and Norway. Indeed, some people even wrote on the questionnaires that chastity was "undesirable" or "bad" in a prospective mate. In China, however, virginity is indispensable in a mate—marrying a non-virgin is virtually out of the question. People from India, Taiwan, and Iran also placed tremendous value on chastity. In between the Western European countries and the Asian countries were Nigeria, South Africa, Zambia, Japan, Estonia, Poland, and Columbia—they all saw chastity as only moderately desirable in a mate.

 Cultures, however, do not seem to be infinitely variable in this regard. We could find no cultures where women valued virginity more than men. In fact, in two thirds of all of our cultures—an overwhelming majority—men desired chastity in marriage partners more than women. Culture does have a large effect on how much chastity is valued. In the majority of cultures, though, so does whether one is a man or a woman.

Although the value men and women place on chastity in potential mates overwhelmingly showed the greatest cross-cultural variability, several other factors also showed large cultural differ-
ences. Examples include: good housekeeper (highly valued in Estonia and China, little valued in Western Europe and North America); refinement/nettiness (highly valued in Nigeria and Iran, less valued in Great Britain, Ireland, and Australia); and religious (highly valued in Iran, moderately valued in India, little valued in Western Europe and North America). These large cultural differences, important as they undoubtedly are, probably mask a great deal of variability across individuals within cultures.

**WHAT DO WOMEN WANT?**

From Aristotle to Freud to contemporary society, scholars have puzzled over the question: What do women want? Trivers's (1972, 1985) seminal theory of parental investment and sexual selection provided a powerful evolutionary basis for predicting some female preferences. Trivers argued that the sex that invested more in offspring should be selected to be relatively more choosy or discriminating than the sex that invested less. Poor mating decisions are more costly to the heavily investing sex. A woman who chooses poorly, for example, might end up abused or find herself raising her children alone—events that would have been reproductively damaging in ancestral (and likely modern) times. Because humans are like other mammals in that fertilization, gestation, and placentation are costs incurred by females rather than by males, it is clear that the minimum investment needed to produce a child is much greater in women than in men. But in other species, such as the Mormon cricket, the pipefish seahorse, and the poison arrow frog, males invest more heavily in offspring and in these species, males are more choosy than females about who they mate with. This highlights the fact that relative parental investment, not biological sex per se, is the driving force behind relative choosiness.

But in species where the less investing sex can accrue and defend resources, where they vary a lot in how many resources they have to contribute, and where some show a willingness to devote resources, the more heavily investing sex is predicted to prefer mates who show an ability and willingness to invest resources. Folk wisdom has it that the concern with material resources is prevalent only in cultures with capitalist systems. Our international study of 37 cultures shows otherwise. In a striking confirmation of Trivers's theory, women value "good financial prospects" and "good earning capacity" more than men. From the Zulu tribe in South Africa to coastal dwelling Australians to city-dwelling Brazilians, women place a premium on good earning capacity, financial prospects, ambition, industriousness, and social status more than men—characteristics that all provide resources.

We were surprised to find these results even in socialist countries and communist countries where there is less income inequality. Women seem to value resources in mates more than men regardless of the political system. Women throughout human
evolutionary history have needed material resources that can help their children survive and thrive.

Are women more choosy than men? Across nearly all cultures, women indeed were more discriminating and choosy than men. Women express more stringent standards across an array of characteristics—they want more of nearly everything. These findings support another key prediction from Trivers's evolutionary theory.

WHAT DO MEN WANT IN A MATE?

Men expressed more stringent standards than women on only two characteristics. The first is youth. Men worldwide prefer wives who are younger than they are (see Figure 2). But how much younger depends on the nature of the mating system. In cultures that permit men to acquire multiple wives, such as Zambia and Nigeria, men prefer brides who are much younger than they are—by as many as 7 or 8 years. In cultures that restrict men to one wife such as Spain, France, and Germany, men prefer brides who are only a few years younger. Interestingly, women in all cultures preferred husbands who were older—because men mature somewhat later than women and because older men often have access to more resources than younger men.

But youth is not the only thing that men want. Men across the globe also value "physical attractiveness" in marriage partners more than women.

Traditional social science theories have assumed that what people find beautiful is culture-bound—that beauty is merely "in the eyes of the beholder" and that standards of beauty are rather arbitrary. We now know that these theories are partially wrong. The available evidence shows that people across cultures see clear and supple skin, absence of wrinkles, lustrous hair, full lips, clear eyes, good health, regular features, and other signs of youth and health as attractive. Although there are cultural preferences for slightly more plump or thin mates, men worldwide regard the same women as beautiful.

The importance men place on good looks is not limited to Western Europe or North America; nor is it limited to cultures saturated with visual media such as television, movies, and videos; nor is it limited to particular racial, ethnic, religious, or political groups. In all known cultures worldwide, from the inner-continental tribal societies of Africa and South America to the big cities of Madrid, London, and Paris, men place a premium on the physical appearance of a potential mate. And they do so for a very good reason.

According to a new scientific theory, these qualities provide the best signals to a man that the woman is fertile and has good reproductive capacity. This is not necessarily done at a conscious level. We like sweet foods without knowing the nutritional logic of caloric intake. Men prize physical appearance and youth without knowing that these qualities signal a woman's fertility and reproductive capacity.

MATE PREFERENCES AND ACTUAL MARRIAGE DECISIONS

People act on their preferences. Worldwide, men do marry women younger than they are, on average. And interestingly, men who possess a lot of resources can obtain younger and more physically attractive mates. Women who are physically attractive can obtain men with more resources and social status. In societies where men purchase their wives, young women command a higher "brideprice" than older women. Finally, among the most prevalent causes of marital dissolution worldwide are infertility, infidelity, and a man's failure to provide
economically (Betzig, 1989). Mate preferences, in other words, are reflected in the actual mating decisions that people make.

CONCLUSIONS

Where does all this leave us? First, it is important to recognize that each person is at least somewhat unique, showing individual patterns of mate preferences. Second, culture clearly matters a lot. The tremendous cross-cultural variability on preferences for “chastity” demonstrate that even characteristics that are close to reproduction are not immutable, unchangeable, or intractable. Third, it is now apparent that men and women worldwide do differ consistently on a few key mate preferences—those where the sexes have faced different adaptive problems over human evolutionary history. Fourth, there are many preferences that men and women share the world over, with both sexes valuing them highly in a mate. In an important sense, as variable as we are across culture and across gender, we are all one species when it comes to mating.

REFERENCES