
The Mating Strategies and Mate Preferences of Mail Order Brides

Bibiana Paez Minervini
Francis T. McAndrew
Knox College

Two studies explored the mating strategies and mate preferences of mail order brides (MOBs) from three different countries. In the first study, 48 Colombian MOBs were compared with 44 single Colombian women who were not MOBs on a variety of attitudinal and demographic characteristics. Both groups also identified qualities that they wished to communicate about themselves to a prospective mate, qualities that they most desired in a mate, and qualities that they believed were most highly sought after by a prospective mate. In the second study, the expressed mate preferences of 60 MOBs from Colombia, Russia, and the Philippines were compared. With only minor cross-cultural variability, both studies confirmed the importance of characteristics such as commitment, ambition, and sexual fidelity that have been identified in previous studies of female mate choice. The results are discussed within a framework of evolutionary explanations for mate preferences in human females.

Keywords: *mail order brides; female mate preferences; human mating strategies; cross-cultural comparison; evolutionary psychology*

The study of sex differences in human mating strategies and the qualities preferred for both short-term and long-term mates has always been one of the liveliest areas of research in evolutionary psychology. The origins of these sex differences can be found in the unavoidable differences in parental investment required by human mothers and fathers coupled with the fact that men can appreciably increase their long-term reproductive fitness by mating with multiple partners in a way that women cannot. Because the average lifetime reproductive success of women is less variable than that of men, females stand to benefit more by being choosy when it comes to selecting a mate (Barrett, Dunbar, & Lycett, 2002).

Although the mate preferences expressed by an individual are affected to some extent by that person's life situation and societal context (Buss, 2004; Kasser & Sharma, 1999; Wood & Eagly, 2002), most studies have demonstrated consistent differences between males and females when it comes to what they are looking for in a mate. Specifically, women are much more demanding than men when it comes to the financial prospects, social status, and economic resources of a prospective mate (Buss, 1989, 1996; Buss & Schmitt, 1993; Buss, Shackelford, Kirkpatrick, & Larsen, 2001; Townsend, 1989). They also express strong preferences for mates who are ambitious, dependable, healthy, and willing to invest in children (Buss, 1989; Buss et al., 1990; Gangestad & Thornhill, 1997; Johnston, Hagemel, Franklin, Fink, & Grammer, 2001; Thornhill & Gangestad, 1999; Thornhill & Moeller, 1997). Related to the criteria described above, women are also more interested in men that are at least somewhat older than they are (Buunk, Dijkstra, Kenrick, & Warntjes, 2001; Kenrick, Groth, Trost, & Sadalla, 1993). The only traits for which males are consistently more discriminating than females is in their desire for mates who are younger and physically attractive, presumably because these

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qualities are good indicators of fertility (Buss et al., 1990; Buss & Barnes, 1986; Buss et al., 2001; Buss & Schmitt, 1993; Feingold, 1990, 1992; Kenrick & Keefe, 1992; Kenrick, Keefe, Gabrielidis, & Cornelius, 1996; Singh, 1993; Singh & Young, 1995). Regardless of whether the research is conducted in industrialized Western countries or more traditional pastoral societies, the aforementioned sex differences in mate preference hold up quite well across cultures (Bereczkei & Csanaky, 1996; Betzig, 1989; Borgerhoff Mulder, 1988; Buss, 1994; Buss et al., 1990; Grammer, 1989; Low, 2000; Pawlowski & Dunbar, 1999; Perusse, 1994).

One of the more intriguing techniques used to study mate preferences is the analysis of personal advertisements placed in newspapers or magazines. Analyzing personal ads provides a glimpse into the preferences of people seeking real mating opportunities, and this approach offers many advantages over laboratory procedures in which people (usually college students) are asked to respond to hypothetical mating situations. The personal ads provide an opportunity to anonymously study a wider range of people under much less artificial circumstances. The studies employing personal ads have reinforced much of what has been learned from laboratory studies. Women are most likely to respond to ads in which men indicate that they are tall, well educated, financially secure, and older than the women responding to the ad, and men are more likely to respond to ads in which women are described as young, physically attractive, and interested in sex (Baize & Schroeder, 1995; Campos, Otta, & Siqueira, 2002; Goode, 1996; Greenlees & McGrew, 1994; Kenrick & Keefe, 1992; Lynn & Shurgot, 1984; Pawlowski & Koziel, 2002; Waynforth & Dunbar, 1995; Wiederman, 1993). For women, being heavier, older, and more highly educated are negatively correlated with the likelihood of receiving a response to a personal ad (Pawloski & Koziel, 2002). One study even found that men were more likely to respond to an ad in which a woman identified herself as a recovering addict than to an ad in which the woman identified herself as obese (Sitton & Blanchard, 1995), thus highlighting the importance that men place on the attractiveness of their partners.

As would be true for any hypotheses, the validity of evolutionary explanations for mate preferences rests on the ability of researchers to replicate findings using a wide variety of research approaches with a range of different participant populations. (See Campbell and Fiske, 1959, for a more detailed explanation of the importance of such cross-validation in research.) Thus, the goal of

the current studies was to further extend the database that we rely on to inform our judgments about the dynamics of human mate selection. Toward this end, we examined mate preferences in several non-Western societies by taking advantage of a rarely studied mate selection strategy: becoming a mail order bride (MOB).

MOBs are females who are explicitly seeking marriage and advertise themselves with agencies that publicize their availability through newspapers, magazines, and the Internet. What distinguishes these women from other mate-seeking women is that they are trying to expand their pool of eligible mates across national borders, and they do so in a way that preserves a freedom of choice that would be greatly diminished if they were to employ more traditional matchmakers. Most MOBs come from Southeast Asia, Latin America, and Russia, and the prospective husbands they seek come primarily from the United States or Western Europe. MOBs are drawn from throughout the social spectra of their respective societies. They include comfortable middle-class women who perceive a shortage of suitable mates in their own countries as well as extremely poor women who are attempting to escape intolerable lives. In either case, as Wilson (1998) has observed, the photographs of these women that are placed in an agency's catalogue are in some sense "passport photos for foreign eyes and a ticket out of Southeast Asia" (p. 117) or wherever else from which they might hail. The countries of origin of the MOBs in the current studies (i.e., Colombia, Russia, and the Philippines) were selected because they are the most common sources of MOBs for Western men.

We had no a priori reason to believe that MOB preferences would be different from the preferences expressed by individuals in personal advertisements. However, if the same patterns of mate preferences were to appear among women from very different countries using such a different mating strategy, we would then have greater confidence in the universality of criteria used by females when seeking mates.

Although the motives of women seeking Western husbands are often driven by economic concerns, this is not always the case. In-depth interviews with several MOBs, husbands of MOBs, and the proprietor of an MOB agency in Colombia were conducted by one of the authors of this study. These interviews revealed that a wide range of factors play a powerful role in the MOB mating strategy. When asked why American customers seek Latina women, the proprietor of the matchmaking service said that American men prefer Latina women as wives because they are believed to take

better care of their husbands and are more tender, warm, and dedicated to their home than are American women. The matchmaker also reported that his American customers sought women who were younger than themselves and those who had stereotypically Latin features such as tan skin and long, dark hair. Latina women, he believed, are interested in American men because they are thought to be more faithful, less jealous, and less chauvinistic than Latino men.

Our interviews captured the irony of situations in which women who were attempting to escape these traditional constraints were being matched with men who were attempting to find a wife whom they believed would embrace this very same lifestyle. For example, one American man who married an MOB had this to say about family life:

The husband and wife are equal partners in the family structure, though not the same. Men and women are different in physical and mental abilities. I feel that the wife has her place in the family structure, such as giving more care to children, the house, and things of that nature. The husband should take care of income and things of that nature.

Similarly, another former husband (age 65) of an MOB stated that he felt

they [American women] were too interested in what I was worth [economically]. With women's liberation in the USA, I had them calling me, coming to my house. Before, the man called the woman when he wanted to date her; the woman was not the initiator. Now is so different from what I grew up with, so I thought that the best thing to do was to meet someone that can't just come to my house.

An MOB now living in the United States explained her reasons for becoming an MOB:

I met men in Colombia, I was married, I had my experience. I decided to look for something different, try men from another culture that might be better than ours. American men are more serious; [they] worry and respect their wife.

Thus, the MOB business as it now operates may be in the perverse position of attempting to match independent, nontraditional women with very traditional Western men.

Another factor that may influence a woman to seek a husband as an MOB is family pressure, especially when she has already reached an age by which she is supposed to have been married. Kojima (2001) identified this pressure to escape the social stigma attached to single women in Korea as a primary motive for MOB emigration to Japan in search of a husband.

The two studies described in this article were designed to extend what we think we know about mating strategies and mate preferences. Toward this end, the first study compared the mating strategy and preferences of a group of Colombian MOBs to those of another group of Colombian women who were not seeking a mate in this way. The second study compared the expressed mate preferences of MOBs from three different countries: Colombia, Russia, and the Philippines. The goal of these studies was to ascertain whether women who choose to become MOBs express different preferences than women who do not resort to this strategy and also to see if MOBs from different countries are different from each other in any significant way. Ultimately, the fit of our data with evolutionary explanations of mate preferences will need to be evaluated.

STUDY 1

METHOD

Participants. The participants were 92 females in Barranquilla, Colombia. Forty-eight participants were selected from an MOB agency called *Bellezas de Barranquilla & Love Latin* (Beauties From Barranquilla & Love Latin). Most of these women were relatively well educated and would be considered middle class in Colombia. Forty-four single Colombian women from Barranquilla who were not associated with the agency also participated. Thirty of them were medical students at the Atlantic University of Barranquilla who filled out questionnaires during a class period in one of their gastroenterology courses. Fourteen other women were recruited informally through social networks available to the researchers. We do not pretend that the group of non-MOBs was in any sense an adequate control group. However, we had to take advantage of whatever populations were available to us, and this other group of women did offer an alternative sample of women who were not MOBs and hence some standard of comparison.

Procedure and questionnaires. Fifty questionnaires were given to the proprietor of the MOB agency (Bellezas de Barranquilla & Love Latin). He distributed them personally to MOBs affiliated with his agency, and he was paid US\$2.20 for each of the 48 questionnaires that were returned.

The questionnaires first asked each participant to provide demographic information such as age, educational level, financial status, and living arrangements. Each individual then responded to three open-ended questions that requested that she name three characteristics that she would want a prospective husband to know about her, three qualities that she wanted her prospective husband to possess, and three qualities that she believed her prospective husband expected to find in her. The remainder of the questionnaire consisted of 19 statements that reflected attitudes toward a wide range of issues such as religion, future career plans, children, self-perceived attractiveness, requirements for a husband, and so forth. Participants indicated the extent of their agreement with each statement on a 1 (*strongly agree*) to 5 (*strongly disagree*) scale. All questionnaires were written in Spanish.

RESULTS

A *t* test indicated that the two groups differed significantly in age, $t(90) = 6.70, p < .001$. The mean age for the MOBs was 26.7 years ($SD = 5.6$ years), and for the control group it was 20.9 years ($SD = 1.5$ years). Thus, the MOBs were on average older and more variable in age. The control group was also more likely than the MOBs to be students—90% versus 23%.

Differences between the two groups on the 19 attitudinal statements were also assessed with *t* tests. In the interest of readability, the statistical values of all of these tests will not be reported here. However, all differences that are reported as being significant met at least the level of $p < .01$ with a $df = 90$, unless otherwise noted. Some differences that were significant at a level of at least .05 will also be reported, but the more conservative level might be the better guide for interpreting the findings given the relatively large number of tests that were performed. There was a significant difference between the two groups on 11 of the 19 items. MOBs were significantly more religious, less likely to be planning a career ($p < .04$), and more likely to think that raising children was more important than working. They were also significantly more likely

to be financially independent ($p < .05$) and to have their families be financially dependent on them. MOBs perceived themselves as less ambitious but more attractive than the control group perceived themselves to be ($p < .03$). Compared to the control group, MOBs felt more strongly that their husband should have a higher educational level ($p < .05$) and a higher occupational status than themselves and also have the correct religious background. MOBs were also less concerned about whether a prospective husband had children from a previous marriage.

The MOBs and control group did not differ significantly on 8 of the 19 items ($p < .05$). They did not differ in their judgments of their own athleticism, and they also did not differ in the importance placed on strong family relationships, female education, wanting children, and financial security. There were also no significant differences in the importance placed on a husband's social status, attractiveness, or health.

The final analyses to be reported involve the three open-ended questions in which the participants reported the characteristics they most wished to advertise to a prospective husband, the characteristics they most desired in a prospective husband, and the qualities in which they believed a prospective husband was most interested. Although a wide range of different words are generated by participants in situations such as this, previous studies have concluded that all of these words can be typically classified into a relatively small number of categories (Barrett et al., 2002). The most common categories include the following: ambition/status/wealth, physical attractiveness/health, commitment to the relationship, fidelity, social skills, sexuality, hobbies and interests, and political and religious beliefs (Barrett et al., 2002; Thiessen, Young, & Burrough, 1993). Using the guide provided by Barrett et al. (2002) for classifying adjectives into these categories, we recorded the percentage of women in each group who included at least one response from a category among the three characteristics or qualities that were given in response to each question. In the discussion that follows, please note that all percentages were rounded to the nearest whole number and that all chi-square analyses that are reported were performed on the raw frequencies of the responses, not on the percentages. Also, given the relatively large number of statistical comparisons being made, a more conservative alpha level of $p < .01$ (rather than the more traditional level of $p < .05$) was used to determine significance. Because no woman in either group provided a response that could be classified as a hobby or

interest on any of the questions, this category was not included in our analysis.

The responses for each group to the question concerning “the three main characteristics about yourself that you would like your prospective husband to know about you” are presented in Figure 1. Figure 1 clearly indicates that women in both groups wished to advertise their faithfulness and sexual fidelity to a prospective husband, as 36 out of 48 MOBs (75%) and 30 out of 43 (70%) members of the control group included some reference to this category on their list, $\chi^2(1) = 0.31, ns$. However, the MOBs were significantly less likely than the control group to want to advertise a strong level of commitment (58% vs. 88%) to a prospective husband, $\chi^2, p < .01$. (Commitment differs from sexual fidelity in that it refers primarily to behaviors that foster a strong family life rather than to sexual behavior.) On the other hand, the MOBs were more likely to include adjectives indicative of good social skills (e.g., extroverted, humorous) in response to this question (63% vs. 35%), $\chi^2(1) = 6.92, p < .01$. The groups did not differ significantly in the desire to advertise their ambition/status/wealth with both MOBs (52%) and the control group (37%) and ranked it as only moderately important, $\chi^2(1) = 3.38, ns$. Neither group seemed to feel it necessary to communicate information about attractiveness, sexuality, or political and religious beliefs. Thus, when it came to advertising information about one’s self to a prospective husband, MOBs and the other Colombian women were in agreement that sexual fidelity, commitment, social skills, and ambition/status were important things to make known, although there were some differences between the two groups as to the rank ordering of these four categories.

The next question of interest asked the two groups of women to name the three most important qualities that their future husband should possess. Figure 2 indicates the percentage of women in each group who listed at least one characteristic falling into each of the respective categories. Once again, there was strong agreement that fidelity was a highly valued trait in a husband (MOB = 85%; control = 88%), and commitment was a close second in desirability (MOB = 73%; control = 70%). There was a significant difference between the two groups regarding the importance of ambition/status/wealth with 91% of the control group but only 50% of the MOBs listing it among their top three most important characteristics, $\chi^2(1) = 17.64, p < .001$. Social skills were considered

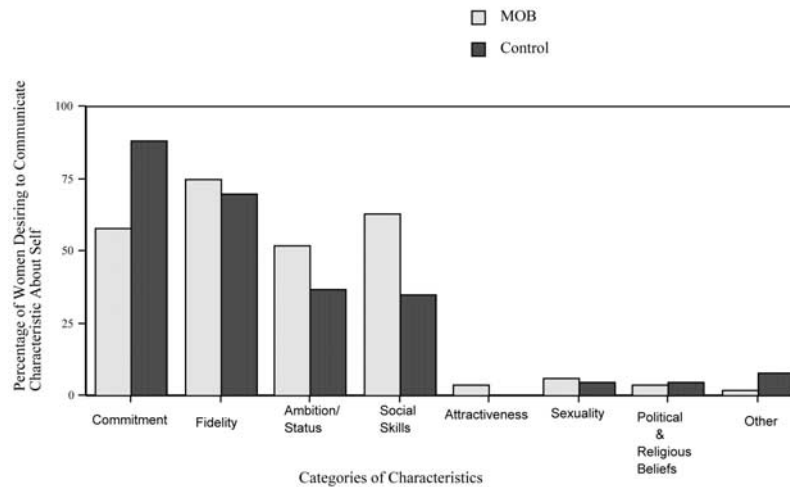


Figure 1: Percentage of Women Naming Characteristics That They Would Want a Prospective Husband to Know About Them

NOTE: MOB = mail order bride.

equally important by the two groups of women with both seeing them as moderately important but less so than the other three aforementioned categories.

Attractiveness/health, sexuality, and political/religious beliefs again were at the bottom of the list.

The third open-ended question asked the participants to list the three most relevant qualities that they thought prospective husbands expected from them. These results are depicted in Figure 3. There was clear agreement between the MOBs (90%) and the control group (91%) that their future husbands expected strong commitment from them, followed closely by fidelity (83% vs. 74%). Ambition/status/wealth was the next most frequently mentioned quality with the control group significantly more likely than the MOBs to mention it (67% vs. 31%), $\chi^2(1) = 11.90, p < .001$. Both groups of women thought that their future husbands would not be as interested in their social skills, sexuality, attractiveness/health, or political and religious beliefs.

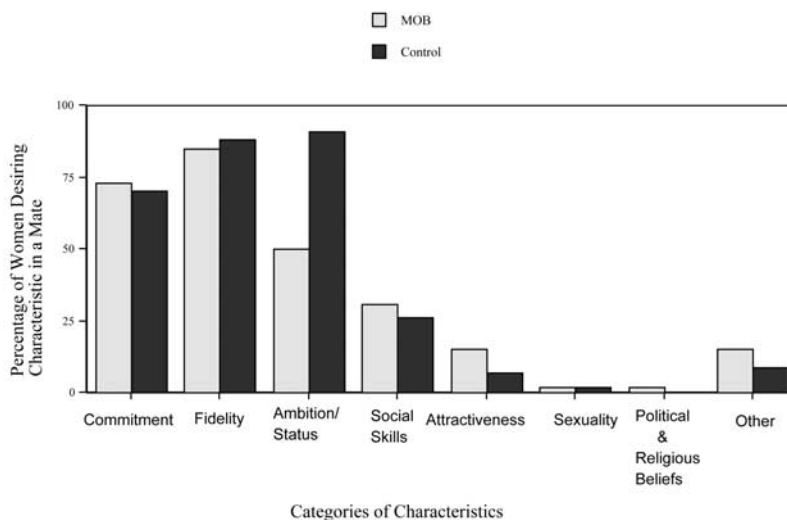


Figure 2: Percentage of Women Expressing a Desire for Particular Characteristics in a Mate

NOTE: MOB = mail order bride.

SUMMARY AND DISCUSSION

There were some significant demographic and attitudinal differences between the two groups of Colombian women who participated in this study, and it would be impossible to judge from the available data exactly what the causal relationship between these factors and mating strategies and preferences might be. This becomes less of a problem, however, when it is recognized that the responses of the two groups to the open-ended questions about mating were much more similar than different and that the attitudinal items relevant to mate preferences in a prospective husband were the ones that showed the least difference. Both groups emphasized the importance of sexual fidelity and commitment as traits to look for in a mate as well as traits to advertise about one’s self. These results line up nicely with the responses to the third question in which the women shared what they thought men sought in a wife, as they believed that these were the two most

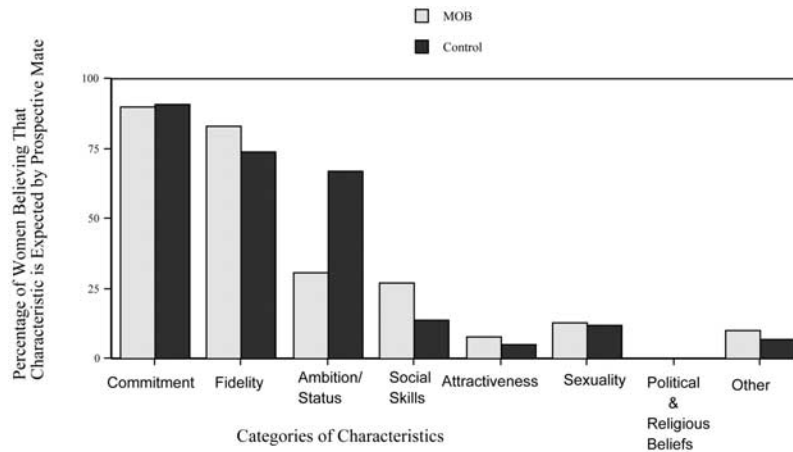


Figure 3: Percentages of Women Who Believe That Particular Characteristics Are Being Sought by Males

NOTE: MOB = mail order bride.

important qualities that men were after. There was, however, a curious disconnect between what women wanted to advertise and what they believed that men wanted regarding social skills, especially for the MOB. Almost two thirds of the MOB wished to communicate information about their personality and social skills to a prospective husband, yet only 27% of these women put these qualities on their list of things in which they thought men were interested.

In light of the considerable body of research demonstrating the importance males place on physical attractiveness, it is interesting that the women in this study were unlikely to bring this up in response to any of the questions. Relatively few of them put it on their list of things that they thought were important to men, and even fewer listed it as something that would be important to advertise. Whether these women are simply unaware of how important this is to men or whether their responses beg some other explanation is an interesting research question in itself.

STUDY 2

METHOD

Participants and procedure. We employed a sample of 60 MOBs who were registered with Internet MOB services. Twenty women were randomly selected from each of the following countries: Colombia, Russia, and the Philippines. Women were sampled from the following six Internet locations:

www.mailorderbrides.com,
www.eastwestmatch.com,
www.latinasinternationalintroduction.com,
www.singlefilipina.com,
www.colombiasingles.com, and
www.russianzest.com.

From each MOB site, we recorded the characteristics that were listed as being desirable for the mate that they were seeking. As in Study 1, each of these characteristics was sorted into one of the standard categories used in mate preference research, and the percentage of women in each group who provided at least one response in each category was compiled. Note that the percentages for the categories in this study may be higher than those in Study 1, because women listed on the Internet site were not limited to listing only three characteristics as were the women in Study 1.

RESULTS

Twenty-two of the 60 MOBs in this study (11 Russians, 8 Filipinos, 3 Colombians) expressed an age preference for a mate, and in each case they expressed a preference for a man older than themselves. No woman ever expressed a desire for a younger mate. The results for all three countries are presented in Figure 4. The top three categories of desired characteristics for the MOBs from all three countries were ambition/status/wealth, commitment, and fidelity. There was no statistically significant difference in preferences among these three categories for the Colombians and Russians ($p > .05$), but the Filipinos were significantly more interested in ambition/status/wealth than they were in commitment or sex-

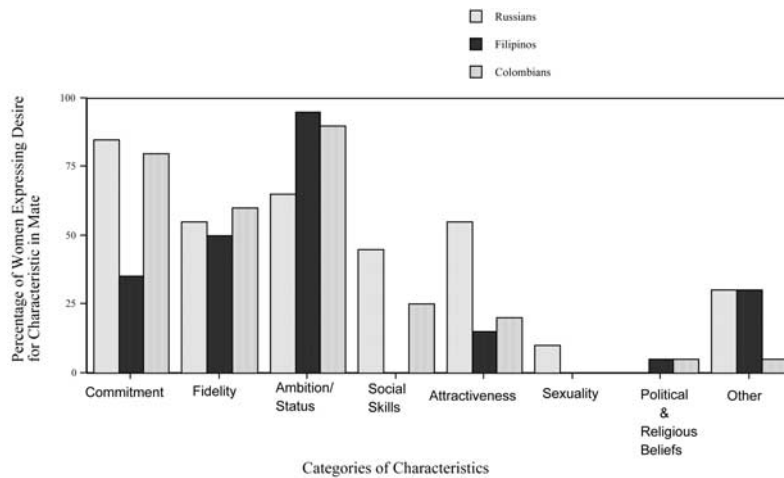


Figure 4: The Percentage of Women Expressing a Desire for Particular Characteristics in a Mate: A Comparison Across Three Countries

ual fidelity, $\chi^2(2) = 6.49, p < .05$. There were also some differences among the groups as to which of the three categories was most important. Traits related to ambition/status/wealth were mentioned most frequently by the Filipinos (95%) and the Colombians (90%), but these traits were only mentioned by 65% of Russian women, thus making it the second most frequently mentioned category for that group. This difference between the Russian women and the other two groups was statistically significant, $\chi^2(1) = 7.26, p < .01$. The most frequently specified requirements for Russian women fell into the commitment category (85%). The Colombian women's interest in commitment ranked second in frequency (80%), and it was ranked third by the Filipinos (35%). The Filipino ranking was significantly lower than the other two groups, $\chi^2(1) = 119.01, p < .0001$. Fidelity was mentioned second most often by Filipinos (50%), and it was third among both Russians (55%) and Colombians (60%)—a difference that was not statistically significant ($p < .05$).

None of the groups appeared to be particularly interested in sex or the political and religious beliefs of a prospective mate. Only 2 out of 20 Russians mentioned sex as being important, and none of the Filipinos or Colombians placed it on their lists. Similarly, only 1 Filipino woman and 1 Colombian woman spontaneously listed a

political or religious preference for a mate, and none of the Russians did so. The physical attractiveness of a mate was significantly more important to the Russian women, mentioned by 55% of them, whereas only 15% of the Filipinos and 20% of the Colombians mentioned attractiveness as a desired trait, $\chi^2(1) = 9.93, p < .01$.

Perhaps the greatest disagreement among the groups occurred in the tendency to mention traits such as humorousness or friendliness, which would have been classified as social skills. Not even one Filipino woman listed anything from this category as a sought-after trait, whereas 9 out of the 20 Russian women (45%) specified good social skills as being desirable. The Colombians fell somewhere in between with 5 out of 20 of them (25%) thinking that social skills were important. The differences among the groups in the frequency of mentioning social skills was statistically significant, $\chi^2(2) = 8.70, p < .05$.

SUMMARY AND DISCUSSION

The results of Study 2 conform fairly well with what was found in Study 1. Once again, indicators of commitment to a relationship, sexual fidelity, and ambition/status/wealth rose to the top of the list. There was little interest expressed in sex, attractiveness, or political and religious views of a prospective husband. Thus, except for the curious lack of interest expressed by Filipino women in the social skills of their prospective mates, there was general agreement across cultures regarding female preferences for qualities in a long-term mate. Although there were some differences among the groups regarding the rank ordering of the three most important categories of traits desired in a husband, the importance placed on finding an older male with access to resources, a commitment to sharing those resources, and sexual fidelity is very much in line with other cross-cultural studies on female mate preferences that have used other methods (e.g., Buss, 1989). Although it was not possible in this study to provide a control group with which to measure male preferences because there is no real male equivalent to MOBs, the females in this study were clearly showing a more typical female pattern of preferences rather than prizing physical attractiveness and sexuality in a mate as males typically do.

GENERAL DISCUSSION

There are undeniable limitations on what can be concluded from these studies because of the nature of the samples that were used and the difficulty in finding appropriate control groups. Nevertheless, collectively, we believe that the two studies described in this article offer an interesting exploration of human female mate preferences as they are expressed via a relatively unusual and greatly understudied mating strategy. The studies provided a comparison of MOBs from three very different cultures as well as a within-culture comparison between a group of MOBs from Colombia and another group of single Colombian women who were not pursuing an MOB mating strategy.

In Study 1, it is not surprising that, when compared to a group of women that included a preponderance of medical students, the Colombian MOBs were less career oriented and more desirous of a mate possessing a higher occupational and educational status than themselves. To the extent that there was a serious disagreement between the two groups, it occurred in their thinking about the relative rank of ambition/status/wealth. It was the group of women who were not MOBs who thought that these were significantly more important qualities in a husband (albeit not necessarily more important than their own status and education), and they were also significantly more likely to think that this is something a husband would be seeking in a wife. Some earlier studies (e.g., Kasser & Sharma, 1999) have indicated that desires for wealth and resources in a mate might be one of the things most susceptible to being affected by one's circumstances. If this is true, it may be that the age and education differences between the two groups were most likely to come into play on this variable. Also, when interpreting the results from this study, one must be mindful that neither group of women participating in this study (students/medical students and MOBs) are likely to be typical Colombian women in a traditional sense. For the non-MOB group, given their level of achievement, it may have simply been unrealistic for them to expect higher status and education from a mate.

The results of Study 2 were consistent with previous research on mate preferences conducted with other populations using different research techniques. The MOBs in our study mirrored the preferences for commitment, fidelity, and ambition/status noted by other researchers (e.g., Buss, 1989, 1996; Buss, et al., 1990; Buss et al., 2001; Johnston et al., 2001). It would have been nice to be able to

contrast female mate preferences with male mate preferences in the same countries, but because there are no male MOB's to serve as an appropriate control group, we must be content with this study as a contribution toward understanding female mate preferences alone.

What we found in our research leads us to remain comfortable with evolutionary explanations of female mate preferences. Given the many differences in cultural and demographic characteristics that existed among our groups, there was ample opportunity for dramatic differences in mate preferences to show up if, in fact, these were decisive variables. With only minor exceptions, such differences failed to materialize. Across the board, we found a preoccupation with the very same characteristics (e.g., ambition, commitment to a relationship and children, sexual fidelity, a mate that is somewhat older) that have been documented by other researchers. In short, women willing to become MOB's do not appear to have a different agenda than other mate-seeking women; they simply have discovered a novel way to expand their pool of prospective husbands.

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Bibiana Paez Minervini is a native of Colombia and a graduate of Knox College. She is currently pursuing graduate study in human resources at the Universidad Autonoma de Barcelona in Spain.

Francis T. McAndrew is the Cornelia H. Dudley Professor of Psychology at Knox College in Galesburg, Illinois. He is a social psychologist with research interests in environmental psychology and evolutionary psychology.