



## The emotional cost of poor mating performance

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### ABSTRACT

Recent studies indicated that a considerable proportion of adult individuals experience poor mating performance: They face considerable difficulties in attracting and retaining mates. Using an evolutionary theoretical framework, we hypothesized that poor mating performance would be associated with more negative and fewer positive emotions as well as low life satisfaction. Evidence from an online sample of 735 participants provided strong support for this hypothesis. In particular, we found that individuals who indicated poor mating performance, experienced more negative emotions such as sadness and loneliness, and fewer positive emotions such as happiness and excitement, and they were less satisfied with their lives. On the other hand, those who indicated a good performance in mating, experienced more positive emotions and fewer negative emotions, and they were more satisfied with their lives. As indicated by the effect sizes, mating performance had a moderate to strong effect on positive and negative emotions and wellbeing. Also, consistent with the results of previous research, we found that about one in two participants faced difficulties in either starting or keeping an intimate relationship.

### 1. Introduction

People are endowed with emotion-generating mechanisms, which are adaptations that have evolved to enable people to survive and reproduce (Frank, 1988; Tooby & Cosmides, 2008). When individuals do not do well in these domains, these mechanisms generate negative emotions that motivate them to take corrective action. For instance, clues of actual or suspected infidelity can trigger jealousy, which can lead to the punishment of the culprit or the termination of the relationship (Buss, 2017). Recent studies have found that many adult individuals faced considerable difficulties in attracting and retaining mates (Apostolou, Shialos, Kyrou, Demetriou, & Papamichael, 2018). Poor performance is expected to be associated with a high emotional cost, and the purpose of the current research is to estimate this cost. Doing so requires understanding the nature of poor mating performance, which we will examine next.

### 2. Why people do not do well in mating?

Attracting and retaining a partner is of outmost evolutionary significance since those who remain unmated do not pass their genetic material to future generations (Buss, 2017). Accordingly, we would expect that strong selection pressures would be exercised on people to evolve mechanisms that would enable them to be effective in attracting and retaining mates; yet, a large number of people experience severe

difficulties in doing so. For instance, three independent studies which employed Greek-speaking participants, found that nearly one in two faced difficulties in attracting or retaining mates (Apostolou, Papadopoulou, & Georgiadou, 2018; Apostolou, Shialos, et al., 2018). Moreover, two different studies found that, about one in two singles in the Greek-cultural context, were involuntary so: They wanted to be in a relationship but they faced difficulties in doing so (Apostolou, Papadopoulou, et al., 2018). Similarly, the high prevalence of singlehood in post-industrial societies (Gallup, 2015; Jones, 2012) is also suggestive of the difficulties that individuals face in attracting and retaining mates.

It has been proposed that the primary reason behind the high prevalence of poor mating performance is the mismatch between ancestral and modern conditions (Apostolou, 2015a). More specifically, we have inherited mechanisms that enabled our ancestors to survive and reproduce, and presumably they could enable us to do the same in the contemporary environment. However, because these mechanisms had been optimized to work effectively in the ancestral environment, they may not work equally well in an environment that is considerably different than that (Li, van Vugt, & Colarelli, 2017; Maner & Kenrick, 2010). Anthropological evidence from contemporary pre-industrial societies, along with historical evidence from ancestral pre-industrial societies, strongly suggests that the contemporary environment related to mating is very different from the ancestral one.

More specifically, anthropological evidence indicates that in a pre-

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industrial context mate choice is typically regulated, and individuals are not free to choose their mates, who are chosen by their parents (Apostolou, 2007, 2010). It indicates further that male-male competition, where men form alliances in order to fight other men and get their resources, including women, is also strong (Puts, 2010, 2016). The chances are that, these patterns characterized ancestral pre-industrial societies, a hypothesis which is corroborated by historical evidence which indicates that arranged marriage and male-male competition were typical of historical pre-industrial societies (Apostolou, 2012; Pinker, 2011 see also Walker, Hill, Flinn, & Ellsworth, 2011). Thus, mechanisms involved in the regulation of mating have evolved in such context, and may not be able to deal effectively with the demands of the post-industrial context where mate choice is freely exercised, and people have to find mates on their own (Apostolou, 2015a).

More specifically, it has been proposed that adaptations which may have been affected by the mismatch between ancestral and modern conditions, involve mechanisms which regulate sexual functioning (Apostolou, 2015b, 2016c, 2016d), personality traits (Apostolou, 2016a), and flirting skills, mating effort and attention to looks (Apostolou, 2015a). Apostolou, Papadopoulou, et al. (2018) and Apostolou, Shialos, et al. (2018) have found that nearly in one in two individuals experienced difficulties in either starting or keeping a relationship, and their mating performance was predicted by their level of sexual functioning, self-esteem, self-perceived mate value, pickiness, personality, attention to looks, and mating effort. Also, men and women did not differ significantly in their mating performance. Evolutionary reasoning suggests that the poor mating performance is expected to be associated with strong negative emotions.

### 3. Emotions and mating

The mechanisms that generate emotions, constitute adaptations which increase the fitness of the genes that code for them (i.e., the chances that these genes are represented in future generations), by motivating individuals to take action that enables them and/or their genetic relatives to survive and reproduce (Tooby & Cosmides, 2008). When individuals find themselves in fitness-decreasing situations, these mechanisms generate negative emotions that motivate corrective action to be taken in order to go away. When individuals find themselves in fitness-increasing situations, they generate positive emotions, which motivate people to stay in this situation as well as to be in similar situations in the future (Apostolou, 2016b). For instance, significant pressure against sharp object triggers the emotion of pain, the sigh of a bear while walking in the countryside triggers the emotion of fear, while receiving bad news (e.g., did not get a job promotion) trigger the emotion of sadness (Damasio & Carvalho, 2013). These negative emotions motivate correctional action; for instance, moving away from the sharp object.

In evolutionary terms, reproduction tops fitness-importance: Those who do not reproduce have considerable fewer chances to have their genetic material represented in future generations in comparison with those who manage to reproduce. In sexually reproducing species as our own, reproduction requires access to the reproductive capacity of the opposite sex, which translates into mating success to strongly predict fitness (Buss, 2017). Therefore, emotion-generating mechanisms are directly involved in enabling individuals to increase their chances of success. Similar to the job example discussed above, if people do poorly in the domain of mating – they face difficulties in attracting and retaining mates – they will experience negative emotions such as loneliness and sadness that would motivate them to take corrective action, including actively looking for a mate, in order to get rid of them. On the other hand, if people experience good mating performance - they are doing well in attracting and keeping mates - they will experience positive emotions such as happiness and fulfillment, that reward them for being in a fitness-increasing path, and motivate them to stay in this path.

The mismatch problem indicates that several people living in post-industrial societies would experience poor mating performance, and consequently they would experience also negative emotions that have a negative impact on their life satisfaction. The purpose of the current paper is to test this hypothesis, namely that poor performance in the domain of mating would be associated with more negative emotions and lower life satisfaction, while good performance would be associated with more positive emotions and higher life satisfaction.

## 4. Method

### 4.1. Participants

The research was performed online, and was designed and executed at a private University in the Republic of Cyprus. We chose this method because of the sensitive nature of the study (i.e., mating), we could get more honest answers in this way. The study was in Greek and the participants were Greek-speaking. We employed different approaches to recruit participants: 1) We posted the link of the study to the official website and the Facebook page of the University, 2) we employed institutional mailing lists, 3) we contacted University academic and non-academic staff, 4) we asked post-graduate students registered in psychology classes to forward the link of the study to their relatives, friends and acquaintances, and to share also the link on their Facebook pages, 5) we asked academics in other universities in the Republic of Cyprus and in Greece to forward the study to their students and acquaintances.

In the current study, 735 individuals (431 women and 304 men) took part. The mean age of women was 26.4 years ( $SD = 6.5$ ), and the mean age of men was 28.3 years ( $SD = 8.4$ ). In addition, 43.8% of the participants were single, 41.4% were in a relationship, 12.3% were married, and 2.4% were divorced.

### 4.2. Materials

The survey was constructed using Google forms, and consisted of five parts. In the first part, we measured life satisfaction using the Satisfaction with Life Scale (Diener, Emmons, Larsen, & Griffin, 1985), a five item instrument participants had to rate using a 7-point Likert scale (1 - totally disagree, 7 - totally agree). In the second part, we assessed participants' happiness using the Happiness Measures (HM), which consisted of two measures, namely an eleven-point scale which the participant uses to check the point that comes closer to the perceived quality of happiness (0 indicating very low level of happiness and 10 very high level of happiness), and a question that asks the participant to determine the percent of time spent in happy, unhappy, and neutral moods that provides a more quantitative index of happiness (Fordyce, 1988). Despite its short length, this instrument constitutes a reliable measure of happiness (Larsen & Diener, 1985).

In the third part, we employed the Positive and Negative Affect Schedule-Expanded Form (PANAS-X) which is a self-report measure that was specifically designed to assess the extent to which participants have experienced distinct emotions during the past few weeks (Watson & Clark, 1999). In particular, we employed the four basic negative emotion scales consisting of 23 items, and the three basic positive emotion scales which consisted of 18 items. Participants recorded their answer using a 5-point Likert-type scale, ranging from 1 - very slightly or not at all to 5 - extremely.

In the fourth part, participants had to complete an instrument about their perceived mating performance which was developed by Apostolou, Papadopoulou, et al. (2018) and Apostolou, Shialos, et al. (2018) and consisted of five statements (Table 1). Participants had to rate each statement using a five-point Likert scale: 1-strongly disagree, 5-strongly agree (the midpoint "3" was not labeled). The instrument was found to have criterion validity, as low scores in mating performance was associated with an increased probability to be single and a decreased probability to be married or be in a relationship. In addition,

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