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What predicts romantic relationship satisfaction and mate retention intensity: mate preference fulfillment or mate value discrepancies?

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ABSTRACT

We test a novel evolutionary hypothesis predicting that mate value discrepancies, but not mate preference fulfillment, will regulate relationship satisfaction. Across Study 1 ($n = 259$) and Study 2 ($n = 300$), we employed new Euclidean measures able to capture preference fulfillment and compute estimates of mate value discrepancies. Relationship satisfaction was not related to how well mates fulfilled their partner's preferences. Mate value discrepancies, in contrast, interacted to predict relationship satisfaction: relationship satisfaction declined for participants whose mates were less desirable than their alternatives, but only for participants who were higher in mate value than their mates. Additionally, these satisfaction differences mediated a relationship between mate value discrepancies and mate retention behavior. This mediation pathway is unique to satisfaction; the same pathway was not observed through trust, a functionally distinct relationship affective state. Study 3 ($n = 301$) addressed a methodological limitation of Studies 1 and 2. We replicated the mate value discrepancy interaction to predict relationship satisfaction, but found an effect of ideal preference fulfillment on relationship satisfaction. These results provide evidence that mate preferences have important, functionally specific effects on within-relationship processes through contributing to two independent discrepancy variables: partner–self and partner-potential mate value discrepancies. They also largely contravene the hypothesis that mate preference fulfillment is the key to relationship satisfaction.

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1. Introduction

Researchers have dedicated considerable attention to the psychology of mate selection, including universal sex differences in mate preferences (Buss, 1989), subtle contextual effects on desire (Haselton & Gangestad, 2006), and continual discovery of novel mate preferences (e.g. cues to exploitability, Goetz, Easton, Lewis, & Buss, 2012). But little research examines the role of mate preference psychology after mate selection—for instance, in guiding behaviors and affective states within relationships and their downstream consequences. In particular, what happens when our mates do not match our preferences? We address this void by applying new multivariate measures to explore novel evolutionary hypotheses about the relationships between mate preferences and relationship satisfaction. In implementing this approach we address (1) how a person's ideal mate preferences should theoretically influence relationship satisfaction in an existing relationship and (2) how relationship satisfaction influences behavior within relationships.

1.1. Ideal partner preferences and relationship satisfaction

Mate preferences evolve to guide sexually reproducing organisms, including humans, toward fitness-promoting mate choices (Sugiyama, 2005). Ancestral humans would have faced an array of potential mates who varied on qualities such as intelligence, health, cooperativeness, fertility, resource holding, and status. Which mates a person chose would have directly impacted their own health, their status and resources, the number and quality of offspring they produced, the provisioning and parenting their children received, and ultimately, their reproductive success. Modern humans are the descendants of prior people who were attracted to healthy, fertile, and kind mates and not their peers who were attracted to mates who were infectious, infertile, and inconsiderate.

Despite what people desire in a mate, they cannot always get what they want. Mate preferences function to motivate people to pursue fitness-promoting mates. However, our ability to acquire these mates depends on numerous factors, including ideal mates existing in the local environment, ideal mates being available to mate, and ideal mates being reciprocally attracted to those who choose them. A key consequence of these multiple mating dynamics is that some people inevitably end up with mates who do not wholly satisfy their ideal mate preferences.

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Precisely how these preference–partner mismatches influence long-term relationships is unclear. One intuitive hypothesis is that natural selection would design our psychology to motivate us to abandon mateships that fall short of our adaptive standards. Fletcher, Simpson, Thomas, and Giles (1999) captured this hypothesis in their study of relationship ideals. They proposed that a mismatch between ideal standards and perceptions of partners would cause a decrease in satisfaction with the relationship as a means of motivating either leaving or altering one's relationship.

Although others have provided some support for this hypothesis (e.g., Meltzer, McNulty, Jackson, & Karney, 2014), the ideal standards model has two limitations. The first is a theoretical issue: a satisfaction mechanism linked directly to mate preferences would have important design flaws (Conroy-Beam, Goetz, & Buss, 2015). Critically, a satisfaction adaptation that responds solely to mate preference fulfillment would not account for important information about mate replaceability. Abandoning a partner who does not fit one's mate preferences would be counterproductive if that required ultimately settling for a partner who was an even poorer fit. A condition-dependent satisfaction adaptation responsive to cues to the probability of finding a better mateship if one's current mateship dissolved would be better designed than one not containing this feature.

One potential input to assessing mate replaceability is the discrepancy between partner mate value—roughly, a person's overall desirability to their pool of potential mates—and own mate value. Partners higher in mate value than oneself are, more or less by definition, difficult to replace. Alternative mates who are also higher in mate value can afford to be more selective in mate choice and will be difficult to attract. A person who abandoned a partner higher in mate value than themselves would risk having to settle for an alternative mate who is a worse fit to their preferences. Higher mate value mates are also more likely to be lured away by mate poachers (Schmitt, 2004; Schmitt & Buss, 2001), and therefore require more investment to hold on to. Conversely, leaving a partner who is lower in mate value than oneself affords the opportunity to attract a mate who better fulfills one's mate preferences. Satisfaction adaptations that motivate defection from partners lower in mate value would be favored over those lacking this important design feature.

In addition to partner differences in mate value, mate replaceability is a function of the pool of alternative mates. Abandoning a partner who is a poor fit to preferences would be imprudent from an evolutionary perspective if there were no better potential partners available. Conversely, holding on to even a good partner might not be the most beneficial decision if available obtainable alternatives are better still. A well-designed satisfaction adaptation would down-regulate satisfaction in response to mate value discrepancies between actual partner and potential partners, but not in the face of mere mismatch between mate preferences and partner traits.

1.2. Measuring preference fulfillment

The second limitation of existing research relating ideal preferences to relationship satisfaction is methodological. Preference fulfillment in extant research is measured exclusively in univariate terms—often as bivariate correlations between stated preferences and corresponding partner qualities. However, potential mates do not come à la carte: each potential mate offers a collection of qualities that must be accepted or rejected as a whole. A potential mate satisfying all of a person's preferences is rare. Most people on the mating market have a choice between an array of imperfect matches, each of whom satisfies and fails to satisfy different subsets of their mate preferences. For the majority of people, mate selection necessarily entails tradeoffs and compromises—sacrificing some preferences so that other preferences may be fulfilled. Univariate measures of preference fulfillment can miss the forest for the trees. Careful balancing across multiple mate

preferences can guide us to long-term mates who match our mate preferences overall even if they fail to fulfill any particular preference.

We have developed a multivariate method that is more able to capture overall preference fulfillment: Euclidean distances between mate preferences and partner qualities. A person's preferences and their partner's actual qualities can be represented as a location in a multidimensional preference space, with each axis in this space representing a preference dimension and location representing standing on that trait. The distance between a person's preference-point and their partner's qualities point is a quantitative, multidimensional measure of preference fulfillment that captures the fact that mate selection requires matching collections of preferences with collections of traits. As such, Euclidean distances provide a more appropriate measure of matches between preferences and partners than matches on single dimensions alone. Importantly, this measure can also be calculated for the traits of actual partners or potential partners and with regard to the preferences of single people or whole groups. Euclidean distances can be used to calculate both preference fulfillment and the two mate value discrepancies we predict to be conceptually related to relationship satisfaction.

1.3. Current Studies

We predicted that satisfaction mechanisms would not track preference fulfillment but instead would track two mate value discrepancies: discrepancies between partner and self and discrepancies between partner and potential partners. Here we tested these predictions across two studies using our new Euclidean measure of preference fulfillment. We calculated (1) Euclidean estimates of participants' preference fulfillment, (2) mate value discrepancies between participants' potential partners and their current partners, and (3) mate value discrepancies between participants' partners and themselves.

In Study 1, we predicted that relationship satisfaction would (1) decrease when potential partners fulfilled mate preferences more than actual partners (partner-potential mate value discrepancies), (2) increase when partner–mate value exceeded self-mate value (partner–self mate value discrepancies), and (3) not be related to the degree to which mates fulfilled mate preferences (preference fulfillment). In Study 2, we sought to (1) replicate the effects of Study 1, (2) test the prediction that discrepancy-related differences in satisfaction in turn predict relationship behaviors, (3) and demonstrate that these effects were specific to relationship satisfaction and not attributable to relationship evaluations in general. Study 3 replicated the findings of Studies 1 and 2 with a modified methodology designed to address a limitation in the earlier studies.

2. Study 1: Mate Value Discrepancies, Preference Fulfillment, and Relationship Satisfaction

Study 1 explored the relationships between preference fulfillment, mate value discrepancies, and relationship satisfaction. We calculated preference fulfillment and mate value discrepancies using our new multivariate method. We expected that satisfaction would be higher among participants mated to partners higher in mate value than themselves and among participants whose actual partners matched their preferences better than alternative partners.

2.1. Method

2.1.1. Participants

Participants were 259 people (140 female) recruited from Amazon's Mechanical Turk. The posting was titled "Complete a Psychological Survey on Attraction" and described the study as "A very brief (<15 min) survey on what you desire in a mate as well as your relationship history." All participants reported being in an ongoing, heterosexual, long-term relationship. Of these participants, 148 were married, 88