



## Original Article

## The framing effect when evaluating prospective mates: an adaptationist perspective

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## ABSTRACT

Sex differences in the framing effect within the mating domain (and the underlying negativity bias) were investigated. In three separate studies, men and women evaluated eight prospective mates, each of which was described using either positively or negatively framed attribute information. The key difference between the three studies was the temporal context of the relationship for which the mates were considered (long-term versus short-term) and the quality of mates that were presented to the participants (high quality versus low quality). Overall, women exhibited larger framing effects than men (and in three of the four experimental conditions), and this sex difference was driven by women's greater sensitivity to negatively framed information. This robust sex effect is a manifestation of the greater vigilance that women show within the mating domain (consistent with parental investment theory). At the attribute level, women displayed stronger framing effects than men in 10 of the 11 cases where significant results were found, and these were on attributes that accord with evolutionary principles (e.g., women exhibited larger framing effects for *Earning Potential* and *Ambition* while men yielded a larger effect in only one instance for *Attractive Face*). Finally, the sex differences in framing effects became stronger when evaluating short-term mates as compared to long term ones (in accord with the general guiding principles of Sexual Strategies Theory). The current paper situates the framing effect within an adaptationist framework and proposes, that in many instances, the pattern with which individuals succumb to it is an instantiation of ecological rationality.

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## 1. Introduction

When forming opinions, making judgments, or implementing decisions, individuals typically process positive and negative information on the target or object in question. For example, when evaluating a car to purchase, one must integrate positive and negative attributes (good fuel efficiency but poor road handling) in arriving at a final judgment. Similarly, when forming an impression of a prospective mate, one is exposed to positive traits (e.g., intelligent) as well as negative ones (e.g., lacks ambition). Many authors, working from different perspectives, have documented the so-called negativity bias (also known as the negativity effect), which stipulates that negative information carries greater weight or influence as compared to its equally valenced positive counterpart (Skowronski & Carlston, 1989; Taylor, 1991; Baumeister, Bratslavsky, Finkenauer, & Vohs, 2001; Rozin & Royzman, 2001). The negativity bias has been shown in contexts as varied as responses to economic information (Soroka, 2006; Akhtar, Faff, Oliver, & Subrahmanyam, 2012), proclivity to engage in consumer-related word of mouth (Anderson, 1998; Silverman, 2001; Park & Lee, 2009), evaluations of the truthfulness of a statement as a function of whether it is positively or negatively framed (Hilbig, 2009),

the greater frequency of negative advertisements in presidential campaigns (Geer, 2012), evaluations of presidential candidates (Klein, 1991), consumers' product evaluations (see Ahluwalia, 2002 and relevant references therein), and greater event-related brain potentials when viewing and then categorizing negative stimuli (Ito, Larsen, Smith, & Cacioppo, 1998).

Typically, explanations of the negativity bias tend not to employ the evolutionary framework (cf. the three classes of theoretical frameworks covered by Skowronski & Carlston, 1989). For example, negative information could be construed as more credible, less frequent (i.e., more novel), and more diagnostic than its positive counterpart, thus rendering it more influential. When the evolutionary framework is applied, the greater weight to negative (vs. positive) information is explained based on its stronger implications for survival (Baumeister et al., 2001, p. 325; Rozin & Royzman, 2001, p. 314; Taylor, 1991, p. 78; Vaish, Grossmann, & Woodward, 2008, p. 395). Of note, Hamlin, Wynn, and Bloom (2010) showed that the negativity bias manifests itself in 3-month-old infants suggesting that this is innate.

The prototypical survival challenges to which the negativity bias might apply would have likely been equally operative for both sexes. As such, no sex differences should arise in the proclivity to succumb to the negativity bias in domains directly linked to such survival challenges. We expect though that within the mating domain the negativity bias will manifest itself differentially across the two sexes.

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Specifically, in light of parental investment theory (Trivers, 1972), impression formation within the mating domain should yield a sex difference along the negativity bias. So, while negative information carries similar survival implications for both sexes, negative information within the mating domain looms larger for women. This is because the costs of choosing a wrong mate are larger for women as compared to men, which would translate into higher vigilance among women when evaluating prospective mates. Thus while one might not expect sex differences in the strength of the negativity bias when evaluating political candidates, friends, or coworkers, we posit that when it comes to the evaluation of prospective suitors, women will indeed exhibit a greater negativity bias than men. The framing effect, a well-established manifestation of the negativity bias, is used to test this general postulate.

The framing effect (Tversky & Kahneman, 1986) is perhaps one of the most frequently studied violations of rational choice. It posits that individuals' preferences can be reversed even when shown two logically equivalent frames. For example, despite the fact that the statements "90% fat free" and "contains 10% fat" are equivalent, they yield radically different perceptions in consumers' minds. The great majority of studies within the voluminous literature on the framing effect have investigated proximate issues under the assumption that the human mind is a domain-general processor (see Kühberger, 1998; Levin, Schneider, & Gaeth, 1998; Levin, Gaeth, Schreiber, & Lauriola, 2002; Maule & Villejoubert, 2007 for overviews of the literature on the framing effect). Moreover, few researchers have explored the framing effect from an evolutionary perspective; and those that have used this lens have not done so within the mating domain (e.g., Moore, 1996; Petrino & O'Neill, 1996; Rode & Wang, 2000; Wang, 1996, 2002; but see Renaud, 2001). The current paper addresses the relative paucity of work in this area by investigating sex differences along the negativity bias in the context of evaluating prospective mates that are described using positively versus negatively framed attribute information. For example, to state that four out of five people consider a given prospective suitor as intelligent ("positive" frame) is logically equivalent to stating that one out of five does not ("negative" frame). While it is expected that both men and women will evaluate given suitors more favorably in the positive frame (a replication of the framing effect albeit in the mating domain), we hypothesize that the strength of the framing effect will be stronger for women.

The recent work on information leakage provides a proximate mechanism to explain how women's greater vigilance in the mating domain might yield an increased likelihood of succumbing to the attribute-based framing effect. The information leakage account proposes that whereas two frames might be logically equivalent, they are oftentimes not equivalent in terms of the information that is leaked via the choice of frame used to describe a given context/scenario (see Sher & McKenzie, 2006 and relevant references therein). For example, the choice of describing someone via "7 out of 10 friends believe that the prospective suitor is intelligent" versus "3 out of 10 friends do not believe that the prospective suitor is intelligent" leaks information as to the suitor's overall desirability along this particular trait. Given that women are more vigilant in their mate choices, it follows that they would be more amenable to "capture" the leaked information and accordingly would be more likely to fall victim to the framing effect. Hence, whereas the information leakage account does not predict a priori which of the two sexes would be better able to "capture" the leaked information across domains, it does provide a proximate mechanism which when coupled with evolutionary-based theorizing yields the hypothesis that women should exhibit greater susceptibility to the framing effect than would men in the mating context. Furthermore, we propose that while women should overall be more sensitive to negative information than men, at the individual attribute level the framing effect will be moderated by sex. In other words, men and women should be differentially sensitive to negatively framed information as a function of whether the given

attribute carries differential sex-specific import within the mating domain. For instance, females should be more sensitive to framing effects in attributes describing the resource capability of prospective mates, while males should succumb more to framing when physical attractiveness is being described.

We test for the above proposed sex differences in framing effect in the context of two factors that are relevant in the mating domain: (1) the *quality* of the mates being examined (high vs. low quality) and (2) the *temporal* context of the relationship (long-term vs. short-term). Mate quality is an important ecological variable to consider for two distinct reasons: (a) organisms (including humans) seek to identify optimal mates based on species-specific metrics of quality (sexual selection); (b) in the human context where two-sided matching is typically operative in the mating market, individuals will often alter their mating preferences and/or aspirations in light of their own objective (or perceived) mate quality (cf. Kavanagh, Robins, & Ellis, 2010; Riebel, Holbeck, Verhulst, & Fawcett, 2010). As such, it is conceivable that the cognitive processes involved in evaluating prospective mates in the current framing context might be affected by their overall quality. The temporal aspect of the relationship serves as an important test of the generalizability of the postulated framing effects, as the two sexes have evolved distinct mating tactics, strategies, and preferences for mates sought for a long-term versus a short-term relationship (Buss & Schmitt, 1993).

We now describe three empirical studies that demonstrate the postulated sex differences in the negativity bias within the mating domain, as manifested in women's greater susceptibility to the framing effect. Study 1 examines the framing effect when individuals evaluate prospective suitors that are described using positively (versus negatively) framed attribute information. The suitors are evaluated for a serious long-term relationship and are generally of high quality (i.e., the information suggests that the suitors are rated highly on the specific attributes; e.g., 7/10 people think they are intelligent). Study 2 alters the information about these suitors and presents them as low quality mates (e.g., 3/10 people think they are intelligent). Study 3 alters the temporal context of the relationship such that the suitors (both of high and low quality) are evaluated for a casual short-term relationship. Taken together, the three studies allow for a robust testing of the sex differences in the negativity bias in the mating domain.

## 2. Study 1

### 2.1. Methods

#### 2.1.1. Study design

The study was part of a larger survey exploring product perceptions, within which the questions of relevance to the current work were included. The part pertaining to mate choice attributes was a between-subjects design with two different versions of the survey. In Version 1, each participant was exposed to four attributes that were framed positively (namely, those pertaining to *Kindness*, *Earning Potential*, *Exciting Personality*, and *Attractive Face*) and four that were framed negatively (ones referring to *Attractive Body*, *Number of Sexual Partners*, *Intelligence*, and *Ambition*). In the alternate Version 2, the framing of these two sets of four attributes was reversed. Please see the Appendix for the exact descriptions used in the above two versions of the survey.

#### 2.1.2. Stimuli

The eight attributes permitted for eight separate tests of the attribute-based framing effect. The set of attributes consisted of both necessities and luxuries (Li, Bailey, Kenrick, & Linsenmeier, 2002), several of which are differentially important to each of the two sexes (e.g., *Earning Potential*, *Ambition*, *Attractive Face*, and *Attractive Body*). The valence of the attribute frames (i.e., positive or negative) was

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