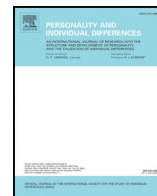




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The effect of mate value feedback on women's mating aspirations and mate preference

Simon D. Reeve^a, Kristine M. Kelly^b, Lisa L.M. Welling^{a,*}^a Department of Psychology, Oakland University, 2200 N. Squirrel Road, Rochester, MI 48309, USA^b Department of Psychology, Western Illinois University, 1 University Circle, Macomb, IL 61455, USA

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ABSTRACT

The concept of a mating sociometer (e.g., Kavanagh, Robins, & Ellis, 2010) suggests that humans adaptively calibrate their mating aspirations in line with their mate value, drawing from relevant cues and experiences. Here we investigate the influence of acceptance versus rejection cues on a variety of mate preferences among women. Results suggest that a rejection cue from opposite-sex individuals decreases overall choosiness when rating the importance of several traits. Specifically, *Cultivated* traits were rated as less important by women who received a rejection cue compared to those who received an acceptance cue or no feedback. Also, *Similar Ideals/Interests*, *Sociable*, *Intellectual*, *Pleasant*, *Physical Attractiveness*, *Kind and Understanding*, and *Wealthy* traits were rated as significantly less important by rejected participants, but these fell short of significance after Bonferroni correction. There was no significant difference in preference for sexually dimorphic body types or in facial coloration between feedback conditions. However, participants that received an acceptance cue preferred more masculine-shaped male faces compared to rejected or control participants. Overall, results provide some support for a sociometer perspective on women's mating aspirations.

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1. Introduction

Many, if not all, patterns in thought and behavior have likely evolved because they conferred an adaptive advantage that increased the frequency of the organism's genetic material in the population in the evolutionary past (e.g., Tooby & Cosmides, 1990). Therefore, mate preferences can be viewed as adaptations that should promote successful reproduction and there is likely an evolved adaptive advantage underlying anything that is generally found attractive. The *Immunocompetence Handicap Hypothesis* (Folstad & Karter, 1992) theorizes that sexually dimorphic (i.e., masculine) traits in men are likely an honest indicator of health, as testosterone actively suppresses the immune system so that only healthy males can afford to develop prominent masculine traits. Indeed, women typically prefer a male face that is more masculine than average (Johnston, Hagel, Franklin, Fink, & Grammer, 2001; but see discussion in DeBruine, Jones, Crawford, Welling, & Little, 2010). Facial sexual dimorphism also occurs in its coloration (Rowland & Perrett, 1995). Compared to men, women tend to have darker eyes and lips relative to the rest of their face (i.e., higher contrast), and male faces with lower contrast are rated more attractive (Russell, 2009). There is also significant sexual dimorphism in body composition characterized by lower body fat and higher muscle mass among men (e.g., Kirchengast, 2010), a greater discrepancy between the measurements of the waist and hips (i.e., waist-to-hip ratio

[WHR]) of women relative to men, and a greater difference between the chest/shoulders and hips/waist (waist-to-chest ratio [WCR] or shoulder-hip-ratio [SHR], respectively) of men relative to women (e.g., Braun & Bryan, 2006).

In addition to considering sexually dimorphic traits when evaluating a potential partner, people consider other personal qualities. Although physical attractiveness is a particularly important trait in a partner for men and status/resources is particularly important for women, kindness and intelligence are reported as necessary traits in a partner for both sexes (Edlund & Sagarin, 2010; Li, Bailey, Kenrick, & Linsenmeier, 2002). The most recent and arguably most extensive attempt at formulating a taxonomy of mate preference traits was conducted by Schwarz and Hessebrauck (2012). Using a participant pool of nearly 24,000 adults between the ages of 18 and 65, these authors established 12 areas of mate preference that encompass both physical (e.g., attractiveness) and personal (e.g., reliability) traits. Thus, both physical and personal characteristics are prized in a potential partner and influence evaluation of their overall value as a mate.

A person's *mate value* can be theoretically surmised as the sum of the "values" of each of their mating-relevant qualities. In real-world situations, individuals tend to mate with someone of a similar mate value to themselves (Buss, 2009). This pattern of mating has been well-established for physical attractiveness, known as the *matching principle* (e.g., Berscheid, Dion, Walster, & Walster, 1971). Certainly, although people tend to desire highly attractive partners, mate selection is constrained by a person's own attractiveness (e.g., Van Straaten, Engels, Finkenauer, & Holland, 2009). However, mating patterns found

* Corresponding author.

E-mail address: welling@oakland.edu (L.L.M. Welling).

in humans may largely be a product of tradeoffs between different, but comparatively valued, sex-linked qualities that lead to a pattern of matching based on overall mate value (Buss & Barnes, 1986). For instance, physical attractiveness in women can sometimes be seen to be “matched” to financial resources in men (reviewed in Buss, 2009). Ellis and Kelley (1999) randomly assigned participants a number to represent their mate value and placed this number on their forehead so it was unknown to them but visible to other participants. The participants’ goal was to wordlessly pair with another participant with as high a “mate value” as possible. There was a high correlation between paired values, suggesting that the experiences of acceptance and rejection within the game causes participants to match according to assigned mate value.

Mate value is a relatively stable individual difference variable, with one study finding that 72.25% of the initial variance in self-perceived mate value could be accounted for at re-test a month later (Edlund & Sagarin, 2014). However, like most psychological individual difference variables – such as personality (e.g., Chaplin, John, & Goldberg, 1988), anxiety (Spielberger, 2010), self-esteem (Heatherton & Polivy, 1991), and financial satisfaction (Nelson & Morrison, 2005) – there is also a clear state component with room for a significant shift in self-perception. Indeed, self-perceived mate value can be temporally influenced by cues and feedback from the environment. For example, researchers have successfully lowered participants’ self-perceived mate value from opposite-sex rejection cues via a scene-priming task (Zhang, Liu, Li, & Ruan, 2015) and through false feedback in a speed-dating paradigm (Ruan & Zhang, 2012; Zhang et al., 2015). This research shows that opposite-sex rejection has a unique impact on self-perceived mate value, given that a comparable same-sex rejection prime did not impact self-perceived mate value, although both same-sex and opposite-sex rejection influenced perception of social acceptance.

Human evolution likely involved managing “tradeoffs” during mate selection with the aim of selecting an *attainable* mate that will most increase the individual’s reproductive success. In line with a domain-specific model of human cognitive mechanisms, Kirkpatrick and Ellis (2001) proposed a *mating sociometer* (among other domain-specific sociometers) overlying the mechanisms that drive matching, whereby humans adaptively calibrate their mating aspirations in line with their mate value by establishing a compromise between ideal mates and realistic/attainable mates. Those who invest too heavily in partners of lower value than what they are capable of attracting are at an evolutionary disadvantage as they fail to achieve a fair return relative to the value that they contribute to a relationship. Likewise, people who ineffectively pursue individuals of higher mate value than what they can realistically attain are similarly at a disadvantage.

Sociometer theory proposes that self-esteem evolved as multifaceted regulatory systems aimed at enabling people to form and maintain beneficial relationships by monitoring the world for cues that are relevant to social domains (e.g., Kavanagh & Scrutton, 2015). The sociometer systems can be conceptualized as a cluster of domain-specific gauges of social functioning. There is some debate on the number of sociometer systems (Kavanagh & Scrutton, 2015), but a devoted mating sociometer is likely given the direct link between mating and reproductive success. Indeed, experimentally induced experiences of rejection or acceptance by attractive opposite-sex confederates influences mating aspirations (Kavanagh, Robins, & Ellis, 2010), and relationship satisfaction and commitment among partnered participants (Kavanagh, Fletcher, & Ellis, 2014), but does not influence friendship aspirations/dedication. These effects are mediated by changes in state self-esteem, which is supportive of an underlying sociometer system. Furthermore, the significant drop in self-perceived mate value after a mate-rejection prime is mediated by a drop in general self-esteem (Ruan & Zhang, 2012). Thus, a mating sociometer appears to be somewhat distinct from a more general social inclusion sociometer, under the broad umbrella of global self-esteem.

The present study will focus on the interplay between mate value relevant feedback, mating aspirations, and mate preferences in women. As women are limited in the number of offspring they can produce in their lifetime by the biological commitment required (e.g., nine months of pregnancy, childbirth, up to four years of lactation; Trivers, 1972), the adaptive costs of pursuing inappropriate mating opportunities are implicitly greater than for men and so the effective calibration of mating aspirations are arguably more crucial to women’s reproductive success. The present study aims to assess the influence of acceptance versus rejection cues (supposedly from members of the opposite-sex) on preferences for sexually dimorphic traits in faces (shape and coloration) and bodies (WCR and muscle mass), and on preferences for traits outlined in Schwarz and Hessebrauck’s (2012) taxonomy.

2. Method

2.1. Participants

Heterosexual adult women ($N = 66$) were recruited from a large public university in the United States in return for course credit. Two participants were excluded for correctly identifying the deception (see below) and one participant was removed for biased responding (i.e., selecting the mid-point response for every item), leaving a total of 63 participants (49.2% Caucasian, 38.1% Black, 12.7% Hispanic; Age: $M = 19.65$ years, $SD = 1.53$, range: 18–24).

2.2. Procedure

The participants were told that the purpose of the research was to imitate the experience of online dating in a controlled experiment with the aim being to investigate the effect of various traits, attitudes, and preferences on the quality of interaction between two opposite-sex people. Participants created a short online profile that would ostensibly be viewed and rated by a group of male participants on dating desirability. They were led to believe that they would later take part in a short conversation with one of these men in an online chat room via a web-cam and would be asked to provide feedback on this interaction. However, there was actually no group of male participants.

To create the fake online profile, a digital photograph was taken of each participant in a natural pose using a Logitech V9000 camera at the beginning of the study and immediately uploaded into a blank online profile. This profile asked participants to report their age, height, and weight, and to comment on subjects typical of dating website profiles (“What are your interests?,” “What are your hobbies?,” “What are your plans for the future?” and “What personality traits and personal qualities do you have that would make you a good person to date?”). Participants were asked not to reveal any other personal information like their name, address, school, or marital/relationship status.

Next, participants were asked to complete some filler tasks (e.g., personality questionnaires) that were not analyzed. After “submitting” the questionnaires on the computer, participants received the following message: “An ERROR has occurred! Please contact the researcher”. When summoned, the researcher navigated to a new survey under the guise of finding the source of the error. After taking a moment as if to consider the bogus error report, the researcher then recited one of three scripts: (1) the rejection condition where participants were told that the error occurred because all the men who had viewed their profile had rated them particularly low, (2) the acceptance condition where participants were told that all men had rated them particularly high, or (3) the control condition where participants were told that the error message was just a glitch.

Following the experimental manipulation, participants were asked to complete a manipulation check and mate preference measures, including a mate preference inventory (Schwarz & Hessebrauck, 2012), a face preference task, and a body preference task. The manipulation

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