



Where birds flock to get together: The who, what, where, and why of mate searching[☆]



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ABSTRACT

An understudied area of personality psychology is how personality traits might facilitate structuring of one's environment toward goals like mating. In four studies ($N = 1325$), we examined (1) self-reports of where individuals go to find long-term and short-term mates, (2) how personality traits are associated with the use of these locations, and (3) how the sexes differ in their selection of mate search locations. Men were more likely than women were to use short-term (e.g., bars) than long-term (e.g., community events) niches, but did not differ in success in those niches and agreed on the nature of those niches. Slow life history traits, conscientiousness and agreeableness, were linked to preferences for long-term niches whereas, fast life history traits, narcissism and dishonesty, were linked to preferences for short-term mating niches.

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1. Introduction

Personality traits may influence who people choose as mates (Buss, 1984, 1987; Jonason, Valentine, Li, & Harbeson, 2011), but does it merely structure mate preferences or does it play a role in mate searching? Mate preferences are what people desire in their partners but mate searching involves the active selection of environments that may or may not facilitate mating. Mate searching plays a central role in reproduction in non-human species (Calabuig, Ortego, Cordero, & Aparicio, 2008; Clarke, Henzi, Barrett, & Rendall, 2008; Hoffman, Forcada, Trathan, & Amos, 2007; Kahlenberg, Thompson, Muller, & Wrangham, 2008; for a critique, see Kotiaho, Lebas, Puurtinen, & Tomkins, 2008), but has generally been ignored by psychologists. In this study, we examine individual differences in where individuals go to find mates and their self-reported success in those ventures.

First, we try to describe the niches people use to find mates consistent with recent work attempting to document how people describe their environments (Rauthmann et al., in press; Sherman, Nave, & Funder, 2010, 2012, 2013). One important

manner by which individuals describe their environment is in relation to the availability of mates. However, prior work did not make the distinction between finding sexual partners and romantic partners. We contend this distinction will be seen in the types of niches individuals choose to find mates because (1) certain niches are composed of features (e.g., low light; Dutton & Aron, 1974; Foster, Witcher, Campbell, & Green, 1998; Gergen, Gergen, & Barton, 1973) that may overtly facilitate short-term sexual encounters whereas others may make sex an afterthought and (2) certain niches may shape mate selection on primarily short-term (e.g., physical attractiveness; Kenrick, Sadalla, Groth, & Trost, 1990; Li & Kenrick, 2006) or long-term criteria (e.g., personality traits; Jonason, Li, & Madson, 2012; Li, Bailey, Kenrick, & Linsenmeier, 2002) because of the traits that are valued in those contexts. Therefore, we expect there to be two primary dimensions of mating niches, short-term and long-term.

Second, we try to account for individual differences in the use and success at these niches with personality traits. The different features that characterize each niche may make them more or less appealing to individuals leading to individual differences in who uses/likes a given niche. Importantly, Life History Theory suggests individuals allocate their time and energy to fitness relevant goals and personality traits may be expressions of biases toward a fast or slow way of life. Fast life strategists are characterized by all manner of socially undesirable or "dark" traits; traits like the Dark Triad. Those high on these traits engage in short-term matings

[☆] Participants and two measures in Study 2 were also used in Jonason and McCain (2012) for alternative purposes. The authors thank Emma Richardson and Ryne Sherman for reviewing this paper prior to submission

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(Jonason, Li, Webster, & Schmitt, 2009) and may not be well-suited for long-term relationships (Jonason, Li, & Buss, 2010). Part of the complex that is called a fast life history strategy may be a tendency to pursue short-term mating opportunities and, therefore, to exploit those niches that are most likely to pay off. For instance, the narcissist would find his mating efforts thwarted at every turn if he went to the museum in hopes of a quick score. In contrast, slow life strategists are characterized by various socially desirable and “light” traits like conscientiousness. These people prefer long-term matings and have generally cautious approach to life. Those characterized by different manifestations of a slow life history strategy may prefer quite different niches, niches that may serve long-term mating goals.¹

Given apparent sex differences in mating strategies (Buss & Schmitt, 1993; Eagly, 1987), we expect the sexes to diverge in how likely they are to use various niches to find short- or long-term partners. Given men’s greater pursuit, interest, and willingness to engage in casual sex (Clark & Hatfield, 1989), it is likely men will be more willing than women are to use a wide assortment of locations to find short-term mates. However, the sexes are thought to differ only where they have faced recurrent and different adaptive challenges and thus sex differences are likely confined—in the case of mating psychology—to short-term relationships where women pay a higher cost for bad choices than men do (Buss & Schmitt, 1993; Jonason, Valentine, & Li, 2012; Li & Kenrick, 2006). In addition, the evolutionary model of sex differences only predicts underlying dispositions that orient men and women toward one way of acting or thinking where relevant (i.e., creates a system of biases). It makes sense the sexes would understand each niche whether they used it or not (Sherman et al., 2012, 2013) and evolved sex differences in mating psychology are often more about psychological dispositions than actual behavior. Therefore, we predict the sexes will agree on the types of locations one would choose for finding long-term and short-term mates and few sex differences in self-reported success at finding mates at various locations.

There is considerable research on various aspects of mating psychology (Jonason & Li, 2013; Kenrick et al., 1990; Simpson & Gangestad, 1991). However, before any of these elaborate systems for reproduction can be exercised, one must find a mate. This aspect of mating psychology has generally been neglected in studies with humans but not as much with non-human animals (Calabuig et al., 2008; Clarke et al., 2008; Hoffman et al., 2007; Kahlenberg et al., 2008; Kotiaho et al., 2008). In four studies we examine (self-reports of) where individuals go to find mates, how personality traits relate to preferences to different niches, and sex differences in those preferences. We contend that personality traits encourage individuals to select particular mating environments that align with their mating orientation.

2. Study 1: identifying mating niches

We begin by determining what are the primary places individuals use to find mates. We then compare men and women on the degree to which they use the different locations to find short-term and long-term mates. This study will provide some basic details about how a series of potential niches are used for mating purposes. It acts as a necessary first step to understand the manner by which personality traits might facilitate the active creation of mating niches, not merely to document where college students go to find sexual or romantic partners.

¹ We make no specific predictions regarding particular traits, and, instead, wish to say something larger about niche specialization as expressed by fast and slow life histories.

2.1. Method

2.1.1. Participants and procedure

One hundred students (70% female) from the University of South Alabama, aged 18–38 ($M = 23.58$, $SD = 4.98$), completed a survey in their class in Personality Psychology in exchange for extra credit. Fifty-two percent were single; 48% were in a serious romantic relationship.² The (first and third) authors created (*ad hoc*) a measure of 50 ostensible niches individuals might use to find short-term and/or long-term mates (available upon request). Participants were asked how much (1 = *not at all*; 5 = *very much*) they felt each niche characterized a place where they might go to find either a short-term (i.e., casual sex partners) or long-term (i.e., serious relationship partner) mate, if they were looking for said relationship type. Thus, participants rated each niche twice: once for short-term mating and once for long-term mating.

2.2. Results and discussion

The Top 10 short- and long-term niches for men, women, and the overall sample can be seen in Table 1. There was strong agreement between the sexes as to the kinds of niches used for short- and long-term mating. Indeed, sex-comparisons of the 100 niches (50 places, each assessed in terms of short- and long-term mating) revealed only six statistically significant differences, which is approximately what one would expect to find by chance alone when using an alpha of .05.³ Specifically, men (vs. women) rated Conventions (both short-term: $t(98) = 2.22$, $p < .05$, Cohen’s $d = 0.81$; and long-term: $t(98) = 2.60$, $p < .05$, $d = 0.95$), Bookstores (long-term: $t(98) = 2.13$, $p < .05$, $d = 0.78$), Laundromats (long-term: $t(98) = 3.44$, $p < .01$, $d = 1.28$) and Clients at Work (both short-term: $t(98) = 3.42$, $p < .01$, $d = 1.25$; and long-term: $t(98) = 2.50$, $p < .05$, $d = 0.91$) as places to find mates.⁴ It appears, based on this analysis, that men and women possess similar conceptualizations of short- and long-term mating niches.

To verify that participants were distinguishing between short- and long-term mating when evaluating the niches, we next conducted a series of paired *t*-tests across mating duration with an alpha of .01. Class, special interest groups, religious events, work, the gym, coffee shops, volunteering, neighborhoods, conferences, parks, the beach, weddings, conventions, bookstores, clients, singles events, and the library received significantly higher ratings for long-term mating ($ts = -3.84$ to -13.68 , $ps < .001$, $ds = -0.10$ to -0.72) whereas bars, nightclubs, and dance clubs received significantly higher ratings for short-term mating ($ts = 4.64$ – 5.79 , $ps < .001$, $ds = 0.14$ – 0.19). This analysis confirmed that some niches were seen by participants as more appropriate for short-term mating while others were seen as being more appropriate for long-term mating.⁵

3. Study 2: individual differences and mating niches

The results of Study 1 identified the primary niches men and women use to find short- and long-term mates. However, Study 1 suffers from some limitations. First, it had a small sample. Second, it relied on item analyses which are considered less than

² Results were invariant across relationship-status.

³ We are, of course, assuming these are independent which may not be the case making it even more likely there are no sex differences in these data.

⁴ Here, and throughout the study, effect sizes were calculated at <http://www.uccs.edu/~lbecker/>.

⁵ For reportorial economy we summarize our results here. The particular effects are not what matter, merely that people are distinguishing the niches on the short-term/long-term distinction. The interested reader is directed to contact the first author for more details.

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