

Romantic relationships, ideal standards, and mate selection

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In this article we discuss the origins of the Ideal Standards Model (ISM), the content of ideal standards, as well as the function of ideals in existing relationships as well as in mate selection. Empirical research testing hypotheses derived from the ISM are presented. Existing controversies, and suggestions for future research, are also discussed. We conclude that the ISM exemplifies the value of adopting a functional approach to social cognition in romantic relationships along with a focus on dyadic influences.

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The Ideal Standards Model (ISM; [1,2]) proposes that individuals possess chronically accessible mate and relationship ideal standards that are used to evaluate both potential mates and existing partners and romantic relationships. The development of the ISM was derived initially from perhaps the most important founding theory in social psychology concerned with romantic relationships — interdependence theory [3]. This theory postulates that perceptions of relationship quality are a function of the discrepancy between the rewards people perceive they are receiving from a relationship and two kinds of benchmark standards — what they feel they deserve from their relationship (comparison level or CL), and what they think is available from an alternative relationship (comparison level for alternatives, or CL_{alt}). Larger perceived discrepancies involving CL or CL_{alt} results in less satisfaction or commitment with the partner or relationship [4].

The ISM contains two unique features that expand on interdependence theory. First, it uses an evolutionary perspective to specify the content and origin of ideal

mate standards. Second, it adopts a dyadic and functional perspective to ascertain how perceived discrepancies influence affect, cognition, and behavior in romantic relationships, and vice versa.

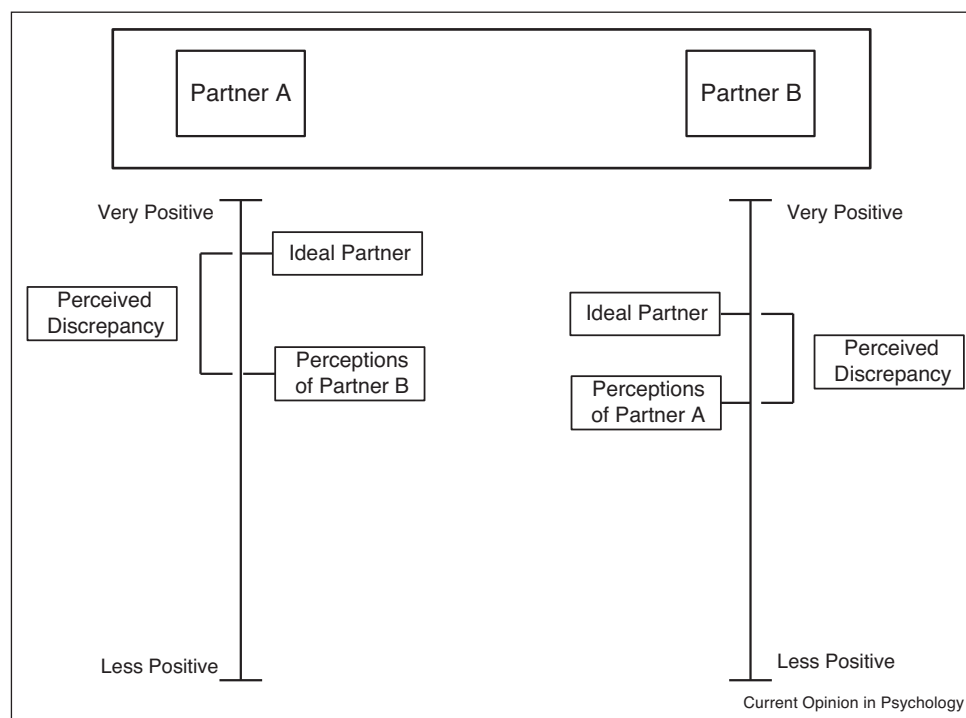
Principles derived from evolutionary theories (see [5,6]) suggest that people judge potential or actual partners on three basic dimensions: (a) warmth and trustworthiness (b) attractiveness and vitality, and (c) social status and resources. Each dimension represents a different route to obtaining a mate and promoting reproductive fitness (see [5]). Being attentive to a partner's capacity for intimacy and commitment should increase chances of finding a cooperative partner who is likely to be a devoted parent. By focusing on attractiveness and vitality or health, individuals are more likely to acquire a mate who is younger, healthier, and perhaps more fertile (especially in the case of men choosing women). And by counting on a partner's resources and status, or the potential to acquire them, individuals should be more likely to obtain a mate who can ascend social hierarchies and form coalitions with other people who have, or can acquire, valued social status or other resources (especially in the case of women choosing men). This tripartite structure regarding how individuals evaluate actual or ideal romantic partners has been empirically supported by factor-analytic studies and is well replicated [1,7].

According to the ISM, the magnitude of the discrepancies between ideal standards and perceptions of the potential or current partner or relationship (hereafter referred to as 'partner discrepancies') allow individuals to (a) evaluate the quality of their partners and relationships, (b) explain what happens in relationships, and (c) regulate both self and partners in relationships (see [Figure 1](#)). Large partner discrepancies indicate an unsatisfactory relationship, which should motivate cognitive adjustments, such as lowering ideal standards or enhancing the partner, or behavioral attempts to change the self or the partner. When individuals fall short of their partner's ideals, they are in a qualitatively different situation. In this case, they may engage in regulatory behaviors designed to reduce the size of their *partner's* discrepancy (e.g., avoid conflict or showcase their own specific qualities in an effort to more closely match the partner's standards).

Partner discrepancies and evaluation

In an initial test of the evaluative function of the ISM, Fletcher *et al.* [1] found that individuals who reported smaller partner discrepancies rated their relationships more favorably. This finding has since been replicated many times (see [8]). Longitudinal studies have also

Figure 1



Example of ideal preferences and partner perceptions, and resulting discrepancies, in both partners.

found that larger partner discrepancies predict higher rates of relationship dissolution both in the early stages of relationship formation [9] and in marital relationships (see [10^{••}]).

Crucially, partner discrepancies should affect not only how individuals evaluate their relationships, but also how the *partners* of individuals feel about the relationship [11]. Campbell and colleagues [12] tested this hypothesis by asking both members of a large sample of dating couples to report their ideal standards, including how closely their partners matched their ideals. Individuals reported higher levels of relationship quality when they more closely matched their partner's ideal standards (see also [7]).

According to the ISM, one of the main functions of ideal standards is to help individuals evaluate the quality of their romantic relationships by accurately identifying areas of strength and weakness in both themselves and their romantic partners [2]. Indeed, recent research using two large samples of heterosexual dating and married partners found that individuals accurately gauged the extent to which they met their partners ideal mate standards, and being aware of how closely one matched their partner's ideals partly mediated the link between how their partners evaluated them and their own relationship satisfaction [13^{••}]. Furthermore, Campbell and colleagues [13^{••}] found that the accuracy of these inferences

were a function of the way partners behaved toward each other during diagnostic conflict interactions.

Partner discrepancies and regulation

In the first test of the regulatory functions of ideal standards, as proposed by the ISM, Overall and colleagues [7] reported that higher partner discrepancies were associated with greater regulation attempts, and these links operated independently within each of the ISM dimensions (warmth and trustworthiness, attractiveness and vitality, and status and resources). Longitudinal analyses over a 6-month period found that higher partner discrepancies predicted increased regulation attempts over time, along with more negative relationship evaluations. Reflecting the dyadic nature of these processes, more regulation by one individual, for example in terms of expressing affection, was associated with the target partner becoming more aware that they were not living up to their partners' expectations, developing a more negative view of their own ability to express affection, and trying to become more overtly affectionate.

In a follow-up study, Overall and colleagues [14] had couples discuss aspects of each other that they wanted to see changed while they were being videotaped. The enactment of more active strategies during the discussion (both positive and negative) was viewed by both partners as less successful in promoting the desired

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