



Individual differences in dispositional mindfulness and initial romantic attraction: A speed dating experiment



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ABSTRACT

Initial romantic attraction has important implications for the development of romantic relationships. Much research demonstrates that physical attractiveness predicts initial romantic attraction. However, less is known about the influence of individual difference characteristics on initial romantic attraction. Here we examined whether dispositional mindfulness predicted initial romantic attraction beyond the effects of physical attractiveness in a speed-dating experiment. Women were more attracted to men higher in dispositional mindfulness, beyond the effects of physical attractiveness. Men were more attracted to women who were more physically attractive, but female mindfulness did not influence male initial attraction. This is the first study to examine the role of dispositional mindfulness in predicting initial romantic attraction.

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1. Introduction

Being in a satisfying romantic relationship is a strong predictor of psychological well-being (Demir, 2008; Diener, Gohm, Suh, & Oishi, 2000), physical health (Kiecolt-Glaser & Newton, 2001), and longer life expectancy (Ross, Mirowsky, & Goldsteen, 1990). The choice of relationship partner is therefore a decision that has important implications. Much research has examined the role of physical attractiveness on initial romantic attraction. More recently, researchers have begun to examine individual difference predictors of initial attraction. In the present research we investigated whether dispositional mindfulness predicted initial romantic attraction in a speed-dating experiment.

1.1. Predictors of initial romantic attraction

Initial romantic attraction refers to the first interpersonal interaction between two individuals where feelings of romantic love are experienced, accompanied by a desire to meet again. Much evidence indicates that external factors such as physical attractiveness and socio-economic status influence initial attraction (Eastwick, Luchies, Finkel, & Hunt, 2013; Guéguen & Lamy, 2012; Pines, 2001). Meta-analyses reveal that the importance placed on physical attractiveness has increased for both men and women

over the past fifty years (Buss, Shackelford, Kirkpatrick, & Larsen, 2001). The importance of physical attractiveness is consistent with an evolutionary explanation of initial attraction. Physical characteristics, such as symmetrical faces, waist-to-hip ratios in women, and shoulder-to-hip ratios in men, have been identified as signs of health and reproductive viability (Gallup & Frederick, 2010), and are thus perceived as desirable (Buss et al., 2001). More recently, however, researchers have begun to examine internal psychological predictors of initial attraction.

Research indicates that individual difference characteristics do indeed influence initial romantic attraction. For example, kindness, intelligence, humour (Buss & Barnes, 1986), emotional intelligence (Atkinson, 2013), emotional stability (Gottman, 2011), conscientiousness, agreeableness, extraversion and low neuroticism have each been associated with greater initial romantic attraction (Figueredo, Sefcek, & Jones, 2006). Luo and Zhang (2009) used speed dating methodology to examine whether a range of personal characteristics predicted initial attraction. The strongest predictor of attraction was physical attractiveness. However, there were also a range of individual difference characteristics that influenced attraction. Males were more attracted to females higher in extraversion, agreeableness and conscientiousness, and lower in neuroticism and negative affect. However, the only predictor of female attraction other than physical attractiveness was male engagement in sports. In brief, there is clear evidence that individual difference characteristics influence initial attraction. However, the initial stages of relationship development are complex, and there are likely to be multiple influences on romantic attraction.

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It is therefore important to continue to examine factors that influence initial romantic attraction. Here we propose that dispositional mindfulness may be one such factor.

1.2. Mindfulness

Mindfulness refers to “paying attention in a particular way: on purpose, in the present moment, non-judgementally” (Kabat-Zinn, 1994, p. 4). Mindfulness involves non-judgemental awareness of the present moment, without becoming consumed by difficult thoughts, emotions or experiences, but also without engaging in efforts to avoid or suppress difficult experiences (Brown & Ryan, 2003; Kabat-Zinn, 1990). There are individual differences in dispositional mindfulness (Brown & Ryan, 2003). Research consistently shows that higher mindfulness is associated with numerous indices of psychological well-being (Brown, Ryan, & Creswell, 2007; Keng, Smoski, & Robins, 2011), including adaptive emotion regulation (Arch & Craske, 2006; Creswell, Way, Eisenberger, & Lieberman, 2007), self-esteem (Pepping, O'Donovan & Davis, 2013), and secure attachment (Pepping, O'Donovan & Davis, 2014). More recently, researchers have begun to examine associations between mindfulness and interpersonal outcomes.

1.3. Mindfulness and interpersonal outcomes

Theoretically, mindfulness should facilitate a relationally focussed, less judgemental, and less experientially avoidant stance to difficult emotions that can arise in interactions with others and in relationships (Wachs & Cordova, 2007). Consistent with this proposition, high dispositional mindfulness is associated with increased relationship satisfaction (Barnes, Brown, Krusemark, Campbell, & Rogge, 2007), and satisfaction with interpersonal relationships more broadly (Pepping, O'Donovan, Zimmer-Gembeck & Hanisch, 2014). Barnes et al. (2007) investigated the impact of mindfulness on communication behaviors during a conflict discussion task between partners and found that those higher in mindfulness were lower in anger and hostility following the conflict discussion. High dispositional mindfulness is also associated with increased engagement and empathy, and reduced anxiety in social situations (Dekeyser, Raes, Leijssen, Leysen, & Dewulf, 2008), and lower self-reported aggressiveness, hostility, and verbal aggressiveness (Heppner et al., 2008). There is accumulating evidence that dispositional mindfulness has beneficial effects on relationship outcomes and processes, including factors likely to impact on the development of relationships, such as emotion regulation and communication. It is therefore likely that mindfulness may impact on initial romantic attraction. In the present research, we tested this hypothesis in an experimental speed-dating study.

1.4. Speed dating

Research into initial attraction has generally used descriptions of hypothetical situations where individuals rate desirable qualities in a potential partner. These studies are limited as they do not evoke the same responses and emotions as in a real-life setting, and do not capture features of conversations that could lead to relationship development (Finkel & Eastwick, 2008). These limitations have prompted the use of the speed dating methodology to more accurately examine predictors of initial attraction. In speed dating, individuals meet many people and interact with each person for a brief period of time, usually three to eight minutes. After the interaction, each person indicates whether they wish to continue communication with this person. If both agree, contact details are exchanged (Finkel, Eastwick, & Matthews 2007). Kenny's (1994) ‘zero acquaintance’ paradigm shows that individuals can make accurate judgements about a person's personality and

intelligence in very brief periods of time. Speed dating is thus an effective way to examine predictors of initial attraction, as it allows for individuals to meet many potential partners in a short space of time, and it imitates real-life situations.

1.5. The present research

High dispositional mindfulness is associated with satisfying relationships, and positive interpersonal processes. However, no research has investigated whether dispositional mindfulness influences initial romantic attraction. The focus of the present study is whether high dispositional mindfulness will be associated with higher initial attraction ratings by individuals' opposite sex partner (partner effects) rather than whether an individual's mindfulness influences their own attraction ratings toward their partner (actor effects). Although it is possible that individuals higher in mindfulness may be less judgemental and thus be less likely to evaluate others harshly, it seems unlikely that an individual high in dispositional mindfulness would universally rate others as more attractive. We therefore focus only on partner effects. It was predicted that high dispositional mindfulness would be associated with higher initial attraction ratings by individuals' opposite sex partner, beyond the effects of physical attractiveness.

2. Method

2.1. Participants

Participants were 91 undergraduate students (M age = 20.86, SD = 3.17). Forty-four were male (M age = 21.12, SD = 3.64) and 47 female (M age = 20.60, SD = 2.61). Participants were informed that the research was designed to investigate the psychology of initial romantic attraction.

2.2. Measures

2.2.1. Mindfulness

The Five Facet Mindfulness Questionnaire (FFMQ; Baer et al., 2006) is a 39-item measure of dispositional mindfulness. It assesses five facets of mindfulness, and these subscales can be summed to yield a total score. In the present research we used the total score as the aim was to examine global relationships between mindfulness and initial attraction and, as other researchers have noted (e.g., Vollestad, Siversten, & Nielsen, 2011), the total score provides a parsimonious account of the relationship between mindfulness and other constructs. Internal consistency in the present sample was high (α = .84).

2.2.2. Initial attraction

The initial attraction scale assesses the degree to which Person A is attracted to Person B (Lewandowski & Aron, 2004). The scale consists of eight items, four that assess romantic or sexual attraction (e.g., ‘How sexy is this person?’ and ‘How much would you like to date this person?’) and four items that assess general attraction (e.g., ‘Is this the type of person you would like to get to know better?’). The questions were answered on a 9-point scale. Internal consistency was high in the present sample (α = .95).

2.2.3. Physical attractiveness

Upon arrival to the session, photos were taken of each participant, and these were rated by two independent assessors (one male and one female) for physical attractiveness on a 9-point scale. The inter-class correlation coefficient (ICC) for the two raters was .81, indicating high agreement. Mean attractiveness rating

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