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The ideal romantic partner personality

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Abstract

Most contemporary social psychological studies on inter-personal attraction have independently explored the competing concepts of similarity and complementarity. Incorporating evolutionary principles associated with assortative mating, two studies were conducted that examined individual difference preferences using the five-factor model (FFM) of human personality as assessed by the NEO-FFI. The first study ($N = 104$) examined the degree to which individuals showed an absolute or relative preference in an “ideal romantic partner” when compared to self-rated personality. The second study ($N = 161$) extended this by incorporating personality ratings for self, “ideal” romantic partner, and “actual” romantic partner, and perceptions of mate value for each. Overall, findings supported both evolutionary and social psychological theories of inter-personal attraction and support both relative and absolute preferences in romantic partners. Individuals sought mates that were matches of themselves to some degree (a concept that we termed aspirational positive assortative mating) but also sought mates that were somewhat higher in Conscientiousness, Extraversion, Agreeableness, and Mate Value, but lower in Neuroticism than themselves.

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1. Introduction

There are two dominant approaches to the study of personality and mate choice: (1) the study of *absolute* preferences for one personality trait over another, also called *consensual* preferences because they are observed to be similar across all individuals; and (2) that of *relative* preferences for a sexual romantic partner's personality in relation to one's own personality. This second type of preference presumes assortative mating according to personality, and this type comes in two possible varieties: (1) *positive* assortative mating, based on the presumed attraction to similarity in personality with one's sexual romantic partner (similarity theory), and (2) *negative* assortative mating, or *disassortative* mating, based on the presumed attraction to dissimilarity in personality with one's sexual romantic partner (complementarity theory).

There is evidence in the literature to support the existence of both consensual (*absolute*) and assortative (*relative*) preferences for romantic partner personality in human mate choice. However, the published studies we reviewed tested either one of these hypotheses or the other exclusively and never appear to have tested both of them simultaneously using a single sample. In the spirit of strong inference (Platt, 1964), we conducted two related studies to pit these hypotheses against each other by statistically controlling absolute preferences for relative ones. The second of these studies also pits these two hypotheses against another derived from evolutionary psychology: assortative mating of actual romantic partners by perceived mate value rather than by idealized standards of personality.

People have concepts of what an "ideal" romantic partner should be, and that often people do "idealize" their current romantic partners (Fletcher & Simpson, 2000; Murray, Holmes, & Griffin, 1996). Further, consistency between ideal standards and current romantic partner characteristics may function in initiating and maintaining relationships (Fletcher, Simpson, & Thomas, 1999). Although there are many characteristics that people see as ideal in a romantic partner, no one romantic partner is going to exemplify all such preferences. As such, trade-offs will be made in mate-selection, with some of these characteristics being more important than others (Fletcher, Tither, O'Loughlin, Friesen, & Overall, 2004). These standards may serve three basic functions; evaluation, explanation, and regulation of the current romantic relationship (Fletcher & Simpson).

1.1. *Absolute and relative mating preferences*

Many studies have examined *absolute* preferences in the personality traits of potential romantic partners. For example, in both national and international samples (Buss, 1985, 1989), found that the two most highly ranked characteristics in a romantic partner by both men and women were "kind and understanding" and "intelligent". In another study (Buss & Barnes, 1986), these two top-ranked traits were joined by "exciting personality" on the list of consensual traits most desired by both men and women in a romantic partner. Reported in the same paper, the 10 most highly valued mate characteristics were "good companion", "considerate", "honest", "affectionate", "dependable", "intelligent", "kind", "understanding", "interesting to talk to", and "loyal".

Other studies have examined *relative* preferences in the personality traits of potential romantic partners. The majority of studies on assortative mating for personality have found small but significant positive correlations across romantic partners on the order of .20 (Buss, 1985). One study

of married couples (Buss, 1984) that generally supported these findings also found a single negative correlation between spouses for dominance and submissiveness. This negative correlation was found in both ratings made by interviewers and by the spouses themselves. Overall, however, the weight of the evidence tends to favor romantic partner similarity (positive assortative mating) over complementarity (negative assortative mating, or disassortative mating).

In a computer dating situation, Lum and Curran (1975) reported that females but not males preferred an opposite sex romantic partner that was moderately to highly similar to themselves on the Extraversion dimension; however, no significant effects were found for matching on Neuroticism. While Keller, Thiessen, and Young (1996) found that both dating and married couples assortatively mated on physical characteristics to a similar degree, assortative mating was higher for married couples on psychological traits. Furthermore, several other studies (reviewed by Mascie-Taylor, 1988) have shown that this spousal similarity is not attributable to the married couple becoming more similar to each other over time. In fact, one study (Buss, 1984) found that older married couples tended to be less similar to each other rather than more.

Studies on marital satisfaction (Eysenck & Wakefield, 1981) have found that similarity predicted satisfaction in general, and even more so when the gender means and directions are taken into account. Although the typical spousal personality correlation was again .20, some were a bit higher, including .73 for “marital satisfaction”, .41 for “sexual satisfaction”, .43 for “libido”, .51 for “radicalism”, and .56 for “tender-mindedness”. However, marital satisfaction was higher if men were higher on Psychoticism and lower on Neuroticism than women. Men reported higher marital satisfaction if their wives were more tender-minded than they were and women had higher marital satisfaction if their husbands were more tough-minded than they were. Marital satisfaction was lower when men had high libido, but was unrelated to women’s libido, although men had generally higher libido than women in this study. Again, there was no evidence of increasing similarity with length of marriage. Dissimilarity predicted divorce.

Perhaps most surprising and most contrary to the principle of consensual preferences is the fact that there is evidence for assortative mating on what would normally be deemed undesirable traits. Arguably, the opposite of many of the prosocial qualities that people find consensually desirable in a mate is Machiavellianism. A Machiavellian mate would presumably be cold, detached, manipulative, and exploitative, rather than nurturing and supportive. Nevertheless, in one study (Novgorodoff, 1974), although men generally preferred low-Machiavellianism women as romantic partners, this was especially true of low-Machiavellianism men. Furthermore, only high-Machiavellianism women preferred high-Machiavellianism men as romantic partners. Similar results have been documented for Depression and Psychopathic Deviate scores from the MMPI, where marital satisfaction scores were higher for individuals who were positively assortatively mated (Lewak, Wakefield, & Briggs, 1985). However, Touhey’s (1977) study in which high Machiavellian individuals showed little attraction to similar others, contradicts these other studies. Instead, individuals high in anxiety and social desirability were significantly more attracted to similar others than those who were not anxious or seeking social approval.

One theory that could potentially explain these results is Genetic Similarity Theory (Rushton, 1989; Rushton & Bons, 2005). According to this theory, in order to increase inclusive fitness individuals seek out other individuals as either romantic or social partners that are genetically similar to themselves by phenotypic matching. Among the different converging lines of evidence advanced for this theory is the high degree of phenotypic similarity on a variety of traits shown by both

friends and romantic partners, with stronger assortment on higher heritable traits (Rushton, 1989, 2004; Rushton & Bons, 2005; Rushton & Russell, 1985; Rushton, Russell, & Wells, 1984). Among these characteristics are a variety of personality traits, although the assortative mating coefficients reported for them are no higher than in the rest of this literature.

An alternative approach to assortative mating comes from evolutionary economic theory. Research suggests that there are certain traits which are seen as desirable in a potential partner because they provide an observable estimate of genetic quality (Buss & Schmitt, 1993; Gangestad & Simpson, 2000; Kenrick, Groth, Trost, & Sadalla, 1993). Therefore, an individual's overall "mate value" can be defined as the sum of such traits an individual possesses, and is a relevant factor when individuals select a mate.

From this viewpoint, individuals are expected to assortatively mate based upon what positive qualities (i.e., mate value) they possess relative to the mate value of a prospective partner (Kirsner, Figueredo, & Jacobs, 2003). To pursue a partner higher than oneself in mate value is likely to result in immediate or eventual rejection, while pursuing a partner too low in mate value would result in obtaining a sub-standard partner, which may lead to relationship dissatisfaction. Therefore, we predict that individuals will assortatively mate based on their perceived mate value, i.e., their perceived mate value will match the perceived mate value of their actual romantic partner. Further, individuals should rate the mate-value of their idealized partners as higher than their own.

Our main hypothesis is therefore that absolute or consensual preferences for an "ideal romantic partner" will be found even when controlling for the relative ones produced by positive assortative mating. A second hypothesis, however, is that relative mate value will control the choice of actual partners more than either absolute or relative preferences for romantic partner personality.

2. Study 1

Due to the different results concerning consensual and relative preferences in the literature, the first study sought to explore the relationship between individuals, as well as sexes, and their perceived "ideal romantic partner" on the human Big-five personality factors, as measured by the NEO-Five Factor Inventory (NEO-FFI).

2.1. Method

2.1.1. Research participants

One-hundred and four undergraduate students from the University of Arizona each completed two personality inventories as part of a class exercise. Eighty-one participants were female and 23 were male, with mean ages of 21.0 and 23.1, respectively.

2.1.2. Measures

2.1.2.1. *NEO-FFI-SELF personality inventory.* The NEO-FFI (Costa & McCrae, 1992) (NEO-FFI-SELF) was used to assess the personality structure of each individual in the sample. The NEO is a trait-based inventory that utilizes lexical adjectives to measure individuals on different characteristics associated with human personality, resulting in five-factors; Openness (O), Consci-

entiousness (C), Extraversion (E), Agreeableness (A), and Neuroticism (N). The NEO has been used extensively and has been found to have strong cross-cultural validation, with minimal variability (McCrae & Costa, 1996).

2.1.2.2. “Ideal romantic partner” personality inventory. The NEO-FFI-IDEAL (Figueredo et al., 2005) is an adapted form of the NEO-FFI. To create an inventory that looked specifically at an individual’s ideal romantic partner, the phrase “my ideal romantic partner” was substituted for the first person pronoun in each of the items, making no more than the necessary grammatical adjustments for that substitution. No other changes were made to the original inventory.

2.1.2.3. Procedures. Inventories were administered during a classroom lecture period. Students were instructed that completion of the inventories was voluntary, and that the theory and results would be explained in a future lecture. It was emphasized by the researcher that one should rate *one’s own* ideal romantic partner, rather than the one that they believe that the rest of society might value. Furthermore, the NEO-FFI-SELF (the original NEO-FFI) was administered *after* the NEO-FFI-IDEAL to avoid priming the subjects for intentionally matching the ideal romantic partner’s personality to one’s own.

2.1.2.4. Statistical analysis. All statistical analyses used SAS version 8.2 (SAS Institute, 1999). Cronbach’s alphas and bivariate correlations used the *PROC CORR* procedure. Mean difference tests were computed using the *PROC UNIVARIATE* procedure.

2.2. Results

Internal consistency (IC) or inter-item reliability estimates for each factor were computed using Cronbach’s alpha. All personality factors yielded good to excellent reliabilities. Cronbach’s alphas equaled .77 for O, .64 for C, .69 for E, .62 for A, and .58 for N on the NEO-FFI-IDEAL, which were comparable in magnitude to those of the self-reported levels of all five-personality factors on the NEO-FFI. Cronbach’s alphas equaled .75 for O, .87 for C, .73 for E, .76 for A, and .82 for N on the NEO-FFI-SELF. This indicated that the pattern of preference ratings on these items conformed quite closely to the known factor structure of the FFM, as measured by the NEO-FFI.

Bivariate correlations between self and ideal romantic partner ratings on these same factors were all significant and substantial. This indicated a tendency towards positive assortative mating on all of the personality factors, at least in terms of the imaginary romantic partners desired, if not the actual ones obtained (see Table 1 for correlations).

Table 1
Correlations between self and ideal romantic partner on each personality factor

	O	C	E	A	N
SELF and IDEAL	.81*	.36*	.60*	.73*	.38*

* $p < .05$.

Table 2

Mean differences between self and ideal romantic partner on each personality factor

	O	C	E	A	N
IDEAL–SELF	.03	.32*	.08*	.24*	–.79*

* $p < .05$.

These data permitted us to perform a more stringent test of absolute preferences in ideal romantic partner personalities. By subtracting the factor scores on the self-rated personality factors from those of the ideal romantic partner factors, we obtained difference scores indicating discrepancies between the ratings of self and of ideal romantic partners. The mean difference scores for each factor were tested against zero for statistical significance, in the equivalent of a difference t -test (or t -test for correlated groups). The scores are measured in the metric of mean differences on a 5-point Likert scale. All of these difference t -tests were statistically significant, except the one for O (see Table 2 for mean differences). There were, however, no significant differences in mean differences either between male and female respondents or among the reported ages of respondents, so these discrepancies were not disaggregated by either sex or age of respondent.

In sum, these results suggest that traits individuals deem to be “ideal” in a romantic partner may be in fact both partially relative and partially absolute. Thus, individuals seek idealized romantic partners that share similar personality characteristics in relation to their own levels of all five factors (O, C, E, A and N), but are also seeking partners who are somewhat higher than themselves on C, E, and A, and somewhat lower than themselves on N.

3. Study 2

The second study examined the relationships among an individual’s self, “ideal”, and actual romantic partner personality. Further, it examined the perceptions of self, “ideal”, and actual romantic partner in reference to mate value. Drawing from evolutionary hypotheses, we predicted that while participants will have specific personality and mate value preferences in relation to their “ideal” romantic partner, it is more likely that their actual romantic partner will reflect positive assortative mating in relation to mate value, rather than their actual romantic partner’s personality.

3.1. Method

3.1.1. Research participants

One-hundred sixty-one undergraduate students from the University of Arizona were offered course credit or extra credit for participation in the study. One-hundred nineteen participants were female, 30 were male, while 12 did not specify their sex. Approximately 87% of the participants reported that they were currently involved in a romantic relationship. Those who were not in a present romantic relationship were asked to complete their “actual” romantic partner questionnaires with respect to their most recent romantic partner. Those who had never been in a romantic relationship were eliminated from the study ($N = 14$).

3.1.2. Measures

3.1.2.1. Personality inventories. Three versions of the NEO FFI (Costa & McCrae, 1992) were used to assess the personality structure of each individual in the sample: NEO-FFI-SELF (i.e., the NEO-FFI), NEO-FFI-IDEAL, and NEO-FFI-ACTUAL (see Study 1 for an explanation of NEO-FFI-SELF and NEO-FFI-IDEAL). NEO-FFI-ACTUAL is an adapted form of the NEO-FFI, created to look specifically at an individual's *current* romantic partner. Phrases were substituted as “my current romantic partner” for the first person pronoun in each of the items, making no more than the necessary grammatical adjustments for that substitution. No other changes were made to the original inventory.

3.1.2.2. Mate-Value Inventories. *The Mate Value Inventory (MVI)* (Kirsner et al., 2003) is a 22-item self-report scale that asks participants to rate themselves on 17 traits theoretically deemed important in mate attraction (e.g., attractiveness, financial security, emotional stability) – with five additional distraction items (jealous, aggressive, controlling, possessive, manipulative) not included in the analysis – using a –3 (Extremely low on this characteristic) to +3 (Extremely high on this characteristic) scale. These traits were sampled from both the evolutionary and social psychological literature on mate value. In addition to the self-reported mate value (MVI-SELF), we assessed both the individual's perceptions of their *current* romantic partner's mate-value (MVI-ACTUAL), as well as what they would seek in their *ideal* romantic partner (MVI-IDEAL), in the same manner as the personality inventories.

3.1.2.3. Procedures. Inventories were administered in a classroom setting in groups of five to 80, in which they either voluntarily participated or received course credit. Upon arrival, participants were told they would be involved in a study on “Person differences and Relationships”. After signing the consent form students were handed a packet divided into three sealed sections (Self, Ideal, Actual) containing bold faced instructions for each section on top of the pages. Upon completion of the packets, all participants were debriefed.

3.1.2.4. Statistical analysis. All statistical analyses used SAS version 8.2 (SAS Institute, 1999). Cronbach's alphas and bivariate correlations used the *PROC CORR* procedure. Mean difference tests were computed using the *PROC UNIVARIATE* procedure.

3.2. Results

Because of the low sample size for males we ran all analyses with sex of respondent both included and excluded as a variable. As in Study 1, sex of respondent did not have an impact on the results, and will therefore not be reported. Likewise, analyses were conducted on whether or not participants reported currently being in a romantic relationship; this variable also did not affect the results and was not reported.

Internal consistency (IC) or inter-item reliability estimates for each of the five factors of the NEO-FFI-SELF, NEO-FFI-ACTUAL, and NEO-FFI-IDEAL were good to excellent. Cronbach's alphas equaled .69 for O, .85 for C, .76 for E, .73 for A, and .83 for N on the NEO-FFI-SELF; Cronbach's alphas equaled .75 for O, .89 for C, .76 for E, .87 for A, and .73 for N on the NEO-FFI-ACTUAL; and Cronbach's alphas equaled .61 for O, .77 for C, .67 for E,

Table 3

Correlations between self and ideal romantic partner, self and actual romantic partner, and actual and ideal romantic partner for personality factors and mate-value

	O	C	E	A	N	MVI
SELF and IDEAL	.54*	.36*	.35*	.43*	.24*	.11
SELF and ACTUAL	.04	.08	.07	-.07	.07	.27*
ACTUAL and IDEAL	.01	.08	.09	-.03	.05	-.05

* $p < .05$.

.73 for A, and .58 for N on the NEO-FFI-IDEAL. Additionally, each of the mate-value inventories demonstrated good reliability. Cronbach's alphas equaled .74 for MVI-SELF, .78 for MVI-ACTUAL, and .81 for MVI-IDEAL.

Correlations between the MVI and NEO for the self, ideal romantic partner, and actual romantic partner were calculated. Only one significant relationship was found between MVI and O for one's ideal romantic partner ($r = .17$, $p < .05$), for all other relationships all r 's were between .15 and $-.08$ (all p 's $> .05$). Thus, it seems that the MVI of one's self, ideal romantic partner, or actual romantic partner has no relationship with their respective personalities.

Table 3 shows the relationships among the self, ideal romantic partner, and actual romantic partner personality scores. As predicted, the NEO-FFI-SELF and NEO-FFI-IDEAL were highly correlated for all five personality factors. Thus, individuals have ideal romantic partners that have personalities which match their own. However, MVI scores for the self and ideal romantic partner were not significantly correlated, indicating that the mate value of one's ideal romantic partner generally did not match one's own mate value.

None of the five personality factors were correlated for the NEO-FFI-SELF and NEO-FFI-ACTUAL. Thus, individuals did not seem to have actual romantic partners who matched themselves on personality traits. There was however, a significant correlation between the MVI scores for the self and actual romantic partner indicating that the main similarity between people and their actual romantic partners is their overall mate value. Lastly, there were no correlations between NEO-FFI-IDEAL and NEO-FFI-ACTUAL for any of the five personality factors or for mate value. Thus, people do not actually seem to obtain actual romantic partners who are similar in any of these characteristics to their ideal romantic partners.

Following the analyses of Study 1, we then subtracted NEO-FFI-IDEAL from NEO-FFI-SELF scores, along with MVI-IDEAL and MVI-SELF scores, in order to assess if participants have ideal romantic partners who exceed themselves in personality traits and mate value. Mean differences tested for significance (see Table 4 for a list of all significant mean differences). Again, the scores were measured in the metric of mean differences on a 5-point scale.

Table 4

Mean differences between self and ideal romantic partner, self and actual romantic partner, and actual and ideal romantic partner for personality factors and mate-value

	O	C	E	A	N	MVI
IDEAL-SELF	.05	.47*	.17*	.30*	-1.02*	.70*
ACTUAL-SELF	-.24*	-.04	-.09	-.14	-.33*	.14*
IDEAL-ACTUAL	.30*	.50*	.25*	.43*	-.68*	.54*

* $p < .05$.

As in Study 1, these results indicated that participants reported their ideal romantic partners as being significantly higher than themselves on C, E, A, along with being significantly lower than themselves on N. There were no significant differences between self and ideal romantic partner ratings for O. In addition, participants reported their ideal romantic partners as being significantly higher than themselves on MVI. Thus, participants did report their ideal romantic partners as being overall more desirable in both personality and mate value than themselves.

We then subtracted NEO-FFI-ACTUAL from NEO-FFI-SELF, and the MVI-ACTUAL from MVI-SELF, in order to assess differences between the personality and mate value of participants and their actual romantic partners. Participants rated their actual romantic partner as not being significantly different from themselves with respect to C, E, or A. However, participants did rate their actual romantic partner as significantly lower than themselves on O as well as N. In addition, there was no significant difference between MVI scores for the self and actual romantic partner. Thus, while no consistent differences appeared, participants did seem to be with romantic partners who were lower on O and N, but statistically equivalent in mate value.

We then subtracted NEO-FFI-IDEAL from NEO-FFI-ACTUAL along with the MVI-IDEAL from MVI-ACTUAL to see if participants had actual romantic partners which had different personality scores from their ideal romantic partners. Results indicated that participants rated their ideal romantic partner as significantly higher than their actual romantic partner on: O, C, E, A, and MVI. In addition, participants rated their ideal romantic partner as being lower than their actual romantic partner N as well. Thus, while participants seem to have strong preferences for personality and mate value with respect to their ideal romantic partners, the personality and mate value of their actual romantic partners were not similar.

4. Discussion

Overall, our findings supported both evolutionary and social psychological theories of interpersonal attraction and suggest that there exist both relative and absolute preferences in romantic partners. Individuals were looking for mates that were matches of themselves to some degree (a concept that we termed *aspirational positive assortative mating*) but also sought mates that were somewhat higher in Conscientiousness, Extraversion, Agreeableness, and Mate Value, but lower in Neuroticism than themselves. Furthermore, these personality results were replicated in two consecutive studies using independent samples.

In addition, the results of the present studies seem to indicate that, while individuals expressed idealized preferences for personalities and mate values in romantic partners, people did not seem to currently be paired with others who match their own personalities, but instead matched their own mate values. However, this lack of assortative mating with current romantic partners may be attributable to the relative youth of the sample, who might not actually have yet found their long-term permanent mate.

The personality scores of the ideal romantic partners exceeded those of the actual romantic partners of the participants in the O, C, E, A, and MVI, and were lower than those of the actual romantic partners in N. Thus, while people may possess idealized conceptions of what their romantic partners should be like, actual romantic partners did not match the participants on any of the traits except for overall mate value. It is quite possible that although individuals aspire

to mate with someone with a similar personality, other dimensions of mate value may override these preferences in actual practice. It is possible that matching for personality is not weighted very heavily in the necessary tradeoffs one might have to make in obtaining an actual romantic partner as opposed to creating an idealized search image.

Nevertheless, we can now conclude more firmly that the significant patterns observed in ideal romantic partner preferences are not merely the indirect effects (through aspirational assortative mating) of preferences for a romantic partner personality similar to one's own. The difference scores indicate significant preferences over and above mere matching to one's own self-reported personality scores. This provides a much cleaner test of the alternative hypotheses. Furthermore, these difference scores showed no statistically significant effects of respondent age or sex. Thus, the main conclusion of this within-subjects study is as declared by the Dodo Bird in Alice in Wonderland: "Everybody wins, and we all must get prizes!" Although the results support at least *aspirational* positive assortative mating for all five personality factors, they also indicate a relatively invariant preference (at least across age and sex) for a romantic partner that is more conscientious, more extraverted, more agreeable, less neurotic, and higher in mate value than oneself.

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