

Kind toward whom? Mate preferences for personality traits are target specific

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Abstract

Previous mate preference studies indicate that people prefer partners whose personalities are extremely kind and trustworthy, but relatively nondominant. This conclusion, however, is based on research that leaves unclear whether these traits describe the behavior a partner directs toward oneself, toward other classes of people or both. Because the fitness consequences of partners' behaviors likely differed depending on the classes of individuals toward whom behaviors were directed, we predicted that mate preferences for personality traits would change depending on the specific targets of a partner's behavioral acts. Consistent with this, two experiments demonstrated that people prefer partners who are extremely kind and trustworthy when considering behaviors directed toward themselves or their friends/family, but shift their preferences to much lower levels of these traits when considering behaviors directed toward other classes of individuals. In addition, both sexes preferred partners who direct higher levels of dominance toward members of the partner's own sex than toward any other behavioral target category, with women preferring levels of dominance toward other men as high as — or higher than — levels of kindness and trustworthiness. When asked to rate traits for which the behavioral target was left unspecified, furthermore, preferences were very similar to self-directed preferences, suggesting that previous trait-rating studies have not measured preferences for partners' behaviors directed toward people other than oneself. These findings may provide a basic contribution to the mate preference literature via their demonstration that ideal standards for romantic partners are importantly qualified by the targets of behavioral acts.

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1. Introduction

The human mate preference literature includes a large number of studies that have sought to identify the personality traits possessed by the ideal romantic partner. These studies have generally converged in finding that people report preferring traits related to kindness and trustworthiness above all other aspects of personality (e.g., Botwin, Buss & Shackelford, 1997; Buss et al., 1990; Buss & Barnes, 1986; Cottrell, Neuberg & Li, 2007; Ellis, Simpson & Campbell, 2002; Fletcher, Simpson, Thomas & Giles, 1999; Kenrick, Groth, Trost & Sadalla, 1993; Kenrick, Sadalla, Groth & Trost, 1990; Li, Bailey, Kenrick & Linsenmeier, 2002; Li & Kenrick, 2006; Pillsworth, 2008; Regan, Levin, Sprecher,

Christopher & Cate, 2000). When forced to make trade-offs among various desirable attributes, the differential value of these traits becomes even more pronounced (Fletcher, Tither, O'Laughlin, Friesen & Overall, 2004; Li et al., 2002; Li & Kenrick, 2006), to the point that Li et al. (2002) concluded from their findings that "people may desire as kind a mate as possible" (p. 953). In addition, despite theoretical reasons to believe that women should prefer intrasexually dominant men (e.g., Sadalla, Kenrick & Vershure, 1987; Snyder, Kirkpatrick & Barrett, 2008), both sexes self-report much lower preferences for dominance-related traits than for traits related to kindness and trustworthiness (Botwin et al., 1997; Fletcher et al., 1999; Kenrick et al., 1990, 1993). Based on these findings, then, the extant self-report literature suggests that people who are highly kind and trustworthy — but also relatively nondominant — should be the most attractive romantic partners of both sexes.

A potentially important ambiguity in the previous literature, however, concerns how subjects interpret terms

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such as “kind” and “dominant” with respect to the targets of behavioral acts that exemplify these traits. When someone rates the importance of “kindness” in a potential mate, do they have in mind kindness directed specifically toward themselves or toward other classes of individuals as well? Notice that different individuals will be considered the most attractive depending on answers to such questions — someone who is highly altruistic toward strangers may be the most desirable mate on a target-general interpretation of kindness, for instance, but on a self-directed interpretation even someone who is relatively unkind toward many classes of people may still be highly desirable as a mate if they selectively direct high levels of kindness toward their romantic partners. Likewise, it is entirely possible that people may prefer that their partners direct opposite patterns of behavior toward different classes of individuals (e.g., dominant behaviors toward unrelated rivals but nondominant or even subordinate behaviors toward self and family). If true, such target-specific mate preferences could fundamentally challenge accepted conclusions regarding the most preferred traits in an ideal partner by demonstrating that preferences are importantly qualified by the targets of behavioral acts.

From an adaptationist perspective, furthermore, it can be predicted a priori that mate preference mechanisms should be sensitive to the targets of behavioral acts since the fitness consequences of partners’ behaviors likely varied dramatically depending on the classes of individuals toward whom behaviors were directed (e.g., kindness directed toward self vs. toward strangers). This prediction presupposes an evolutionary history of individuals treating different classes of targets differently enough that behaviors directed toward one class of individuals did not fully predict behaviors directed toward other classes. A large body of theory and data within behavioral biology supports this supposition, though, as data supporting inclusive fitness theory (Hamilton, 1964), reciprocal altruism/social exchange theory (Cosmides, 1989; Trivers, 1971) and theories of animal conflict (Archer, 1988) all demonstrate selective delivery of fitness costs and benefits toward different classes of individuals. Observing a chimpanzee sharing food with close kin or a prospective sexual consort would not allow one to accurately infer high levels of generalized altruism in that individual, for example, nor would it likely be valid to observe a pattern of aggression directed toward a status rival and then infer a tendency of that individual to aggress against his mate or offspring. With respect to humans in particular, furthermore, research in personality psychology has demonstrated that an individual’s pattern of trait-exemplifying behaviors exhibited toward one type of person can be a poor predictor of those same behaviors exhibited toward other types of people (e.g., Fleenor, 2008; Shoda, Mischel & Wright, 1994). Assuming that such target-specific personality profiles were a recurrent feature of human social behavior, mate evaluation mechanisms should be sensitive to the specific targets of behavioral acts.

1.1. The present research

This research provides the first empirical tests of whether mate preferences for personality traits show adaptive patterns of variability across targets of distinct functional significance. Similar to previous studies, subjects were asked to evaluate personality trait terms for the extent to which they describe the behavior exhibited by their ideal romantic partner. In contrast to previous studies, however, the targets of those patterns of behavior were specified as either (1) oneself, (2) one’s close friends and family, (3) other members of the ideal partner’s same sex or (4) other members of the subject’s same sex. These behavioral target categories were selected for two main reasons. First, ancestral humans would likely have interacted with members of each of these categories on a regular basis (e.g., Kelly, 1995). Second, as argued below, the fitness consequences of a mate’s behaviors would have differed in important ways when directed toward these different categories of individuals.

As initial tests of target-specific mate preferences, we assessed subjects’ preferences for kindness, trustworthiness and dominance in a prospective partner. ‘Kindness’ refers to behaviors that deliver material resources or other forms of social support to another at a cost to oneself, or that communicate one’s willingness to do so (see Li et al., 2002). ‘Trustworthiness’ refers to a tendency to adhere to stated intentions and to honor commitments over time (see Cottrell et al., 2007; Fletcher et al., 1999). Finally, ‘dominance’ refers to behaviors that employ forceful or competitive tactics in order to promote desired outcomes and/or achieve status in a social hierarchy (see Sadalla et al., 1987; Snyder et al., 2008). In what follows, we describe the theoretical rationales underlying our hypotheses regarding how preferences for behaviors exemplifying these trait categories should differ across distinct behavioral targets.

1.1.1. Preferences for a partner’s behavior directed toward oneself

When considering a partner’s behaviors directed toward oneself, both sexes should prefer partners who are extremely high on kindness and trustworthiness and low on dominance. This is because a partner who is very kind and trustworthy toward oneself can be expected to deliver material resources and other forms of social support consistently over time and to refrain from engaging in extra-pair affairs (e.g., Buss & Schmitt, 1993; Cottrell et al., 2007; Li et al., 2002). Conversely, as noted by a number of authors, dominant behaviors directed toward oneself may result in fitness costs via physical injury or coercion into action against one’s interests (e.g., Ellis, 1992; Jensen-Campbell, Graziano & West, 1995; Snyder et al., 2008). For these reasons, the profile of the ideal romantic partner’s self-directed behavior should constitute a conceptual replication of the pattern typically reported in the extant literature when the targets of behavior are left unspecified.

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