



Self-enhancement biases, self-esteem, and ideal mate preferences



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ABSTRACT

People seek ideal romantic partners who are similar to themselves. In this research, we tested whether this preference reflects a self-enhancement bias. Study 1 ($N = 40$) found that people who like themselves a lot (i.e., high self-esteem people) were more likely to describe their ideal romantic partner in terms that matched their self-evaluations than were people whose self-feelings are more ambivalent (i.e., low self-esteem people). Study 2 ($N = 141$) extended these findings by showing that low self-esteem participants who had just been given positive feedback about themselves were just as apt as high self-esteem participants to describe their ideal romantic partner in terms that matched their self-descriptions. Taken together, these findings suggest that the more that people like themselves, the more they will desire an ideal romantic partner who is just like them.

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What processes shape people's preferences for an ideal mate? One possibility is complementarity. Like the lead character in the Hollywood movie, *Jerry McGuire*, people might be looking for a romantic partner who "completes them" by being the things they are not (White & Hatcher, 1984; Winch, 1958). Although cinematically appealing, this hypothesis has not fared well. Instead of seeking someone with different traits from their own, people seek others who are highly similar to themselves on a broad range of attributes (Byrne, 1971; Heider, 1958; Klohnen & Luo, 2003).

The reason why people seek similar ideal mates is less clear, however. One possibility is that a preference for a romantic partner who shares one's own qualities is an example of assortative mating: a general tendency for animals to mate with others who possess similar attributes. Another possibility is that we prefer ideal mates who are like us because we generally feel more comfortable with those who share our tastes, opinions, and interests, or believe they are more informative targets of social comparison. All of these possibilities enjoy empirical support (Cooper & Sheldon, 2002).

The present studies test a related hypothesis. Building on evidence that most people view themselves in highly positive terms (Alicke, 1985; Brown, 1986, 2012; Taylor & Brown, 1988), we test whether self-enhancement processes guide the search for a romantic partner. Our thinking is this: Because most people like

themselves a lot, they seek a romantic partner who is a lot like them (Jones, Pelham, Carvallo, & Mirenberg, 2004). To the extent that this is so, we should find that a preference for similar others varies across levels of self-liking (i.e., the more people like themselves, the more they want a romantic partner who is just like them).

Our hypothesis is consistent with other research on self-enhancement biases in interpersonal relationships. For example, most people treat their relationship partners as extensions of themselves (Aron & Aron, 1997), and people who like themselves a lot are especially prone to view their romantic partners in unrealistically positive terms (Fletcher & Kerr, 2010). Extending these associations to "fictional" ideal mates, we predict that people who are very fond of themselves are most inclined to look for a romantic partner who shares their qualities.

Importantly, the self-enhancement perspective differs from a simple similarity hypothesis. Unlike a similarity model that does not incorporate individual differences in self-feelings, the self-enhancement perspective assumes that the desire for a similar romantic partner will be stronger among those who like themselves a lot than among those who are less enamored with themselves. In statistical terms, whereas the similarity perspective is a "main effects model" (i.e., across levels of self-liking, people seek a romantic partner who shares their qualities), the self-enhancement model predicts a Self-liking \times similarity interaction (i.e., similarity will be stronger when self-liking is high than when it is low).

We conducted two studies to test these competing hypotheses. In the first study, we tested whether the desire for a similar ideal romantic partner is stronger among people who characteristically like themselves a lot (i.e., high self-esteem people) than among

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those whose feelings of self-affection are typically less strong (i.e., low self-esteem people). In the second study we tested whether temporary changes in self-feelings affect the preference for a similar romantic partner. In both studies, we expected that people who felt good about themselves would be especially likely to desire a partner who was just like them.

1. Study 1

1.1. Method

1.1.1. Participants

Forty undergraduate students from a university in the U.S.A. (22 females) participated in exchange for course credit in various lower division psychology courses. All of the students had completed the Rosenberg self-esteem scale (Rosenberg, 1965) prior to the start of the experimental session.

1.1.2. Materials and procedures

After signing an informed consent form assuring them of privacy, all participants completed two questionnaires presented in counterbalanced order. One questionnaire asked participants to indicate to what extent 10 traits described them, and the other questionnaire asked participants to indicate to what extent the same 10 traits described their ideal romantic partner. All ratings were made on 5-point Likert scales with appropriate endpoints (1 = not at all; 5 = very much). The 10 traits were chosen because they are valued personal qualities: attractive, competent, good-looking, honest, imaginative, intelligent, interesting, kind, responsible, and warm.

1.2. Results and discussion

1.2.1. Preliminary analyses

Preliminary analyses indicated no significant effects of gender and this variable is ignored in the reporting of all statistical analyses. In addition, one (male) participant gave identical ratings of 5 on all 10 traits for his ideal romantic partner, and his data were discarded.

1.2.2. Trait ratings

After averaging the 10 ratings for self and one's ideal partner (both α 's > .69), we submitted the scores to a Target \times Self-esteem moderated regression, with target treated as a repeated measure and self-esteem treated as a continuous predictor, centered around its mean.¹ A cross-product term was formed by multiplying the two predictors.

The analysis revealed lower-order effects of Target, $F(1,37) = 34.56, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .48$, and self-esteem, $F(1,37) = 9.57, p < .005, \eta_p^2 = .21$, as well as a Target \times Self-Esteem interaction, $F(1,37) = 5.10, p < .05, \eta_p^2 = .12$. Table 1 shows predicted values for participants scoring one standard deviation above and below the mean on self-esteem. Simple effects tests showed that both self-esteem groups rated their ideal romantic partner more positively than they rated themselves, but this tendency was stronger when self-esteem was low, $t(37) = 5.74, p < .001$, than when self-esteem was high, $t(37) = 2.52, p = .016$. Additional analyses revealed a significant simple effect of self-esteem for self-ratings, $t(37) = 3.80, p = .001$, but not for ratings of one's ideal romantic partner, $t(37) = 1.42, ns$.

Table 1

Attribute ratings for self and ideal romantic partner: Study 1.

	Low self-esteem	High self-esteem
Self	3.76	4.21
Ideal romantic partner	4.26	4.42

1.2.3. Mixed modeling

Our primary interest was in testing whether self-esteem moderated the association between self-ratings and ratings of one's ideal romantic partner. To test our hypothesis, we conducted mixed modeling, with ratings of one's ideal romantic partner as the criterion, and self-ratings and self-esteem as predictors. Self-ratings were centered around each participant's average self-rating, and self-esteem was centered around the sample average. A cross-product term was added to model the expected interaction.

It is important to understand the advantages of this statistical technique. First, by centering self-ratings around each participant's own mean, we remove any association between self-evaluations and self-esteem (i.e., the correlation between self-esteem and individually mean-centered self-evaluations = 0). Second, instead of assessing mean differences (which have now been eliminated), mixed modeling assesses the association between one set of variables and another. With the present set of data we are asking "does the variability in self-ratings predict the variability in ratings of an ideal mate" (main effect of self-ratings), and if so, is this predictability greater among high self-esteem participants than among low self-esteem participants (predicted Self-Ratings \times Self-Esteem interaction). Thus a Self-Ratings \times Self-Esteem interaction indicates that the association between self-ratings and ratings of an ideal mate is stronger among people who like themselves a lot than among those who do not.

In keeping with our predictions, mixed modeling revealed a lower order effect of self-ratings, $b = .3348, p < .001$, and the predicted Self-Esteem \times Self-Ratings interaction, $b = .0239, p < .01$. Figure 1 shows the predicted values for participants scoring one standard deviation below and above the mean on each predictor. Follow-up tests showed that, as predicted, the simple slope of self-ratings was stronger when self-esteem was high $b = .4558, p < .001$, than when it was low, $b = .2139, p < .001$ ².

It is important to be clear again about the nature of these findings. Yes, high self-esteem people rate themselves more positively than do low self-esteem people, but this is not the effect illustrated in Fig. 1. Instead, as noted earlier, there is no association between self-ratings and self-esteem in the mixed modeling analysis, and the figure does not plot mean differences; it plots the strength of the association (simple slope regression coefficients) between self-ratings and ratings of an ideal romantic partner, documenting that these two judgments are more tightly coupled when self-esteem is high than when it is low. Because the simple slope is steeper when self-esteem is high (rather than low), these data support the conclusion that, even after controlling for elevations in self-ratings, people who like themselves a lot are especially interested in finding an ideal mate who is just like them; and because similarity models of attraction do not incorporate differences in self-liking, these findings are more consistent with a self-enhancement model than a similarity model. However, because the sample size for Study 1 was rather small, the superiority of the self-enhancement model should be considered provisional at this point.

² As an alternative to mixed modeling, we also analyzed the data using a continuous parameter estimation model (see Figueredo, Woodley, Brown & Ross (2013)). Consistent with our earlier findings, the standardized cross-product term between self-rating and ratings of an ideal partner was stronger when self-esteem was high than when it was low ($b = .0269, p < .05$). A comparable pattern emerged in Study 2.

¹ We aggregated the data across traits because a preliminary analysis failed to reveal a significant Self-Esteem \times Trait \times Target interaction ($F < 1$). The disaggregated data for both studies are available from either author upon request.

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