

Relationship satisfaction depends on the mating pool, study finds

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Relationship satisfaction and the energy devoted to keeping a partner are dependent on how the partner compares with other potential mates, a finding that relates to evolution's stronghold on modern relationship psychology, according to a study at The University of Texas at Austin.

When it comes to mating, people choose partners whose collective qualities most closely reflect what they would prefer in an ideal mate. They prioritize from an array of traits such as intelligence, health, kindness, attractiveness, dependability and [financial prospects](#).

UT Austin psychology researcher Daniel Conroy-Beam and his collaborators developed a method to test how [mate preferences](#) influence behavior and emotions in relationships in the study "What predicts

romantic relationship satisfaction and mate retention intensity: mate preference fulfillment or mate value discrepancies?" in-press in *Evolution & Human Behavior*.

"Few decisions impact fitness more than mate selection, so natural selection has endowed us with a set of powerfully motivating mate preferences," Conroy-Beam said. "We demonstrate that mate preferences continue to shape our feelings and behaviors within relationships in at least two key ways: by interacting with nuanced emotional systems such as how happy we are with our partner and by influencing how much or little effort we devote to keeping them."

For the study, researchers simulated a mating pool from 119 men and 140 women who had been in relationships for an average of 7½ years. Each participant rated the importance of 27 traits in an ideal mate and the extent to which they felt each trait described both their actual partner and themselves. Researchers then used their new method to calculate each of the participants' and their partners' mate value, or desirability within the mating pool as determined by the group's average ideal preferences.

Participants also reported their relationship satisfaction and happiness. The study discovered that satisfaction was not reliably dependent on how a partner compared with a person's idea of the perfect mate, but rather whether others in the mating pool better matched a person's ideal preferences.

Those with partners more desirable than themselves were satisfied whether or not their partners matched their ideal preferences. But, participants with partners less desirable than themselves were happy with their relationship only if their partner fulfilled their ideal preferences better than most other potential mates in the group, Conroy-Beam said.

"Satisfaction and happiness are not as clear cut as we think they are," Conroy-Beam said. "We do not need ideal partners for relationship bliss. Instead, satisfaction appears to come, in part, from getting the best partner available to us."

In a follow-up study, the researchers again tested [relationship satisfaction](#) but also surveyed participants' mate retention efforts—energy devoted to maintaining their relationships. They found that people with partners difficult to replace, either because their partner was more desirable than themselves or their partner more closely matched their ideal preferences than others in the group, reported being happier and devoted more effort to mate retention. This included making themselves extra [attractive](#) for their partners and "mate guarding," or shielding their partners from mating rivals to help keep their partners, Conroy-Beam said.

"Relationship dissatisfaction and mate guarding intensity, in turn, are key processes linked to outcomes such as infidelity and breaking up, both of which can be costly in evolutionary currencies," said co-author and psychology professor David Buss. "Mate preferences matter beyond initial mate selection, profoundly influencing both relationship dynamics and effort devoted to keeping [partners](#). Mates gained often have to be retained to reap the adaptive rewards inherent in pair-bonding—an evolutionary hallmark of our species."

Provided by University of Texas at Austin

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