

Exploring the trade-off between quality and fairness in human partner choice

November 9 2016, by Nichola Raihani



Being generous may be more important than you think. Credit: Kar Tr

What do you look for in a partner? Surely that depends on what the partner is for – you'd probably want a business partner to be innovative, a choir buddy to be musical and a romantic partner to be attractive and

funny. But how do such qualities and skills compare with simply being decent, as in fair and generous?

Humans are unusually prosocial – we routinely cooperate with non-relatives to an extent that far surpasses that of any other living creature. Nevertheless, there is a significant downside to helping others: the risk of being suckered by a cheating individual – someone who takes the benefits of cooperation without contributing to the pot. Understanding how humans form mutually productive relationships, while at the same time avoiding social parasites, is the key to understanding the evolution of extreme sociality in humans.

Reputation – a signal about your previous behaviour that observers can use to infer how you might behave in the future – [lies at the heart of the issue](#). One major reason why individuals care about and invest in their reputation is because we evaluate and choose partners for social and romantic interactions on the basis of this information.

From an evolutionary point of view, we should use this clue to pick the best partners for whatever interaction we are doing. But what does best actually mean? The best partner could be one who is the most able to give you things, such as a business partner with great [wealth](#), knowledge and contacts. Or the best person may be someone slightly lower achieving who is more open to share the qualities they have – in other words the most generous.

In many cases, ability and willingness to give might be correlated – it is easy to be generous if you have plentiful resources. But what if they don't line up so neatly? Do we prefer the "highest quality" partners even if they're a bit stingy, or do we go for "lower quality" but fairer individuals?

Dictator game

To find out, we recruited 788 participants from an online crowdsourcing website to take part in an online, modified version of a classic anthropological experiment: [the dictator game](#). This is a simple economic task used to gauge prosocial tendency. Individuals interact in pairs as "dictators" and "[receivers](#)". Dictators are given some money and told that they can give as much (or as little) as they like to receivers. Receivers have no control over the allocation and must accept any offer the dictator makes.

Our dictator game was modified in a few important ways, to allow us to determine how people trade off ability versus willingness to give when choosing partners. First, we gave rich dictators five times as much money to share with receivers compared to their poorer counterparts, meaning rich ones could offer higher absolute payoffs – even when relatively stingy. We also modified wealth stability. In stable environments, the rich stayed rich and the poor stayed poor, whereas in unstable environments, current wealth was not predictive of wealth in the next game.

Finally, receivers could choose or avoid dictators on the basis of their reputation for having been fair or stingy in the previous game. Receivers observed the decisions made by two different dictators in a first game – and then decided which of these individuals they would like to choose as their own partner in a second game. We were especially interested in how receivers prioritised wealth over fairness in a partner when these traits were opposed to one another.

The results, [published in *Royal Society Open Science*](#), were striking. As expected, when wealth and fairness were aligned (for example, when choosing between rich-fair and poor-fair partners), receivers typically picked the rich partner – and this preference was especially pronounced in stable environments. When choosing between rich-stingy and poor-fair partners, however, the majority of receivers preferred the poorer

partner – even in stable environments where the poor tended to stay poor (57% did this). This was despite the fact that they had an expected payoff reduction of almost 25%. As expected, receivers showed an even stronger preference for poor-fair over rich-stingy dictators in unstable environments, with over 85% choosing the poorer partner.

Generosity in the real world

The decision rules we use to select partners might not be economically rational, but they are probably ecologically rational, in that they somehow increase fitness in the environment that they were selected in.

But is there evidence that humans actually operate like this in the real world? Some [evidence from hunter-gatherer societies](#) has shown that generosity is indeed more important than hunting skills in determining the popularity of hunters within their social networks. The best hunters may catch more meat, but it is those who share what they catch who are preferred as hunting partners. Our study supports these findings: ability to give is valuable, but willingness to give is indispensable.

And could it hold true for romantic relationships? It's hard to do the exact same experiment with the most common things we look for in a [partner](#) – such as intelligence, humour and good looks – as these tend to be much more stable traits than wealth. But, in the experiment, the majority of people picked poor-fair partners over rich-stingy even when wealth was unchangeable. So there may be a similar pattern in dating where generosity or fairness could trump looks or intelligence. Future work could explore the relative importance of these traits when it comes to dating.

Other qualities, such as wealth or [social status](#), tend to be more changeable over time and therefore a better analogy when it comes to dating. Status may for example change during transitions in life – you

may have high status in high school but not in university. We'd certainly predict that people will value fairness more than social status during such transition times, and will value social status more when those successes are stable across time and situations.

So the next time you find yourself in a social situation where you're keen to make an impression, being fair and generous is a good place to start. There's every chance it could pay off.

More information: Exploring the trade-off between quality and fairness in human partner choice. *Royal Society Open Science*, [DOI: 10.1098/rsos.160510](https://doi.org/10.1098/rsos.160510)

This article was originally published on [The Conversation](#). Read the [original article](#).

Provided by The Conversation

Citation: Exploring the trade-off between quality and fairness in human partner choice (2016, November 9) retrieved 11 May 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2016-11-exploring-trade-off-quality-fairness-human.html>

<p>This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.</p>
--