

Looking for love: How we can fool ourselves when we are into someone

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Can we truly assess whether someone finds us attractive? Cognitive psychologist Iliana Samara conducted her Ph.D. project on romantic attraction and discovered that men, in particular, tend to overestimate the

interest of their date. She explains why this may be.

"Imagine you walk into a packed bar, looking for a date. Your eyes are naturally drawn to attractive faces. If you're a man and find someone attractive, you're more likely to assume they're also interested in you.

"Then, when you approach them, whether you're a man or woman, you tend to mimic their body language. This mirroring behavior boosts your chances of securing a date." This is how Iliana Samara explains the findings of her four years of research.

Samara will defend her Ph.D. thesis "How do we form romantic bonds?" on 15 May. In her thesis, conducted as part of Mariska Kret's CoPAN Lab, she studied how [romantic attraction](#) affects our perception and attention and what choices we make when we find someone attractive.

Long gaze

First, Samara found that people respond faster to [attractive faces](#). She tested this in a speed dating experiment in the LEVEL-building, where the Leiden University Psychology labs were previously located. In four sessions, the research team paired up 10 man and 10 women who would all go on a five minute speed date with all participants from the opposite sex.

"Before the participants actually met, we showed them a picture of the persons they would later go on a speed-date with and ask them to rate how attracted they were to their future dates." Then the participants had their speed-dates.

"Using eye tracking, we tracked the subjects' gaze and found their gazed lingered longer at the faces of people they had previously rated as attractive."

So, what kind of faces do we find attractive? "In psychology, it has long been thought that symmetrical faces in particular do well; symmetry is said to be associated with fitness and would therefore arouse interest. Recent research suggests that it is mainly average proportions that make someone's face attractive."

No gaze following

In the same experiment, it was also discovered that the gaze direction of attractive people was not followed more frequently. This was contrary to Samara's expectations.

"We are more likely to perceive people we find attractive as more trustworthy and competent. So our hypothesis was that people would prioritize the social cues of those they were attracted to. So if someone looks the right, for example, we would tend to follow their gaze.

"However, this turned out not to be the case. One likely explanation is that we are slower to disengage our attention from attractive individuals. But this mechanism is something I want to explore further."

Excitement blinds

After the speed dating experiment, Samara and her colleagues asked participants whether they were interested in a follow-up date and whether they expected that interest to be mutual. Men often overestimated the likelihood that their date would want to see them again.

"Note: we observed this mainly in men who found their female date attractive. Men who were less interested in the other person estimated their chances more realistically."

This phenomenon is known as the sexual overperception bias: our own arousal influences how we interpret social cues from the other person. Why is it that men, in particular, over-perceive their dating chances?

"A theory from [evolutionary psychology](#) suggests that women have to be more selective; if they have sex with a man who then does not invest in them, they may have to handle a resulting pregnancy and offspring on their own. Women are therefore more vulnerable if they make a wrong judgment in dating. On the other hand, men would rather risk some embarrassment than miss out on the opportunity to mate."

Coy smile betrays interest

Finally, Samara examined how couples mirror each other's body language during speed dates. "Mimicking each other's facial expressions and [body language](#) has a social advantage; people who subtly mirror each other find each other more likable."

To determine which expressions correlated with a follow-up date, Samara analyzed over a hundred videos from the speed dates. To be able to focus solely on the facial expressions, the videos were muted. This coding process took over three hours per video, during which she recorded the [facial expressions](#) and noted how quickly those expressions occurred one after the other.

Those who displayed the same expression as their date within five seconds were probably subconsciously mimicking the other person.

"We assumed that imitating each other's smiles would increase the chances of getting a second date. Surprisingly, that was only true for the coy smile, where, while smiling, you tilt your head or look away for a moment. This expression often indicated mutual interest. Conversely, people who mirrored a broad, genuine smile at each other during a date

more often did not want to go on a second date with the other person."

Doing more diverse research

After her Ph.D., Samara will continue her research on romantic attraction at Leiden University. In the future, she aims for a diverse participant pool, including bisexual and homosexual couples, as well as individuals who do not identify with any gender.

"One limitation of this study is that we only examined heterosexual couples. This is also the case for participants in most of the existing literature. Part of this limitation is practical; it's somewhat more challenging to find a sufficient number of non-heterosexual couples to draw statistically significant conclusions. However, I would love to see us approach this differently in the future."

Provided by Leiden University

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