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Original Article

Do People Know What They Want: A Similar or Complementary Partner?

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Abstract: The present study examined the extent to which individuals seek partners with similar, as opposed to complementary, personality characteristics. Results showed that whereas individuals desired a partner who resembles them in terms of personality, when asked about their preferences in general, most individuals indicated that they desired a complementary partner instead of a similar one. In addition to a similar partner with regard to personality, women also desired a more conscientious, less neurotic and more extraverted partner than men. These results are discussed with reference to the importance of matched personalities in marital success.

Keywords: partner selection, similarity, complementarity, personality

Introduction

In the last few decades numerous studies have been carried out on the characteristics individuals value most in a mate. Several studies have, for instance, shown that individuals, especially men, highly value a potential mate's physical attractiveness (e.g., Buss, Shackelford, Kirkpatrick, and Larsen, 2001). Much more scarce are studies that relate individuals' own characteristics to those they desire in a potential mate. With regard to these "relative" mate preferences two hypotheses have been presented. First, according to the "similarity-attraction hypothesis" individuals feel most attracted to potential partners who, in important domains, are similar to themselves (e.g., Lucas, Wendorf, and Imamoglu, 2004). Similar individuals are assumed to be attractive because they validate our beliefs about the world and ourselves and reduce the risk of conflicts (e.g., Morry and Gaines, 2005). Not surprisingly therefore, similarity between partners contributes to relationship satisfaction (e.g., Lutz-Zois, Bradley, Mihalik, and Moorman-Eavers, 2006). Because a happy and long-lasting intimate relationship contributes to both psychological and physical health (e.g., Berkman and Syme, 1994), similarity between partners increases their own and their offspring's chances of survival by helping maintain (the quality of) the pair bond. In

contrast, according to the “complementarity hypothesis” individuals feel most attracted to potential partners who complement them, an assumption that reflects the saying that “opposites attract” (e.g., Antill, 1983). Complementary individuals are assumed to be so attractive because they enhance the likelihood that one’s needs will be gratified (e.g., De Raad and Doddema-Winsemius, 1992). For example, young women who lack economic resources may feel attracted to older men who have acquired economic resources and therefore may be good providers (Eagly and Wood, 1999). In addition, from an evolutionary perspective, one might argue that seeking a complementary mate, rather than a similar one, may help prevent inbreeding.

Studies on mate selection have consistently found support for the “similarity-attraction” hypothesis. Homogamy has been reported for numerous characteristics such as physical attractiveness (e.g., White, 1980), attachment style (e.g., Klohnen and Luo, 2003), political and religious attitudes (e.g., Luo and Klohnen, 2005), socio-economic background, level of education and IQ (e.g., Bouchard and McGue, 1981). In contrast, support for the “complementarity hypothesis” is much scarcer. Although many individuals occasionally feel attracted to “opposites”, attractions between opposites often do not develop into serious intimate relationships and, when they do, these relationships often end prematurely (Felmlee, 2001).

Similarity in Personality

Although numerous studies have investigated partner similarity in domains such as attitudes, intelligence and physical attractiveness, personality has been far less often the focus of study. More specifically, although several studies have revealed similarities between partners in their personalities (e.g., Buss, 1984; McCrae, Martin, Hrebícková, Urbánek, Boomsma et al., 2008) only few studies have investigated the extent to which similarity in personality *leads* to romantic attraction (Barelds and Dijkstra, 2007). From their finding that couples across age groups show the same partner similarities McCrae et al. (2008) conclude that mate selection, rather than convergence over time, accounts for personality similarity among partners. The present study aimed to test this conclusion more explicitly by asking people who are actively seeking for a long-term mate for their preferences for a potential long term mate’s personality characteristics relative to those of their own. Do they seek for a partner who resembles their personality or who complements it?

The present study builds upon the Five Factor Model of personality (e.g., Digman, 1990), that distinguishes between five personality factors, i.e. neuroticism, extraversion, openness, conscientiousness, and agreeableness. In line with the “similarity-attraction” hypotheses, we expected individuals to desire mates who are similar to themselves with regard to their personality characteristics (Hypothesis 1). We base our expectation also on several studies conducted among married individuals. Most of those studies only found weak evidence for spousal similarity in personality (e.g., Barelds, 2005; Luo and Klohnen, 2005). We, however, suspect that these studies do not fully reflect individuals’ desire for a similar partner. A previous study of Barelds and Dijkstra (2007), for instance, shows that individuals who take the time to get to know each other’s personalities before they get romantically involved - in contrast to those who become romantically involved relatively quickly - end up with a partner with a more similar personality. Thus, although individuals may desire a similar partner, they may not always succeed in selecting one.

In addition to desiring a similar partner, men and women have been found to value different personality characteristics in a partner. More than men, women desire a reliable (e.g., Buss, 1994) and socially dominant partner (e.g., Sadalla, Kenrick and Vershure, 1987). The latter refers to a partner who is characterized by self-confidence, extraversion, and authoritative (Sadalla et al., 1987). Women's preference for such a partner can be explained by the fact that socially dominant men generally achieve a relatively high position in the social hierarchy and, as a consequence, are relatively good providers (e.g., Sadalla et al., 1987). Women's desire for a relatively reliable mate has been attributed to women's preference for a long-term – as opposed to a short-term - mate who is willing to emotionally and financially invest in them and their offspring (e.g., Buss, 1994). In terms of the Five Factor Model of personality, we therefore expected women to desire a more conscientious, extraverted and emotionally stable (i.e. less neurotic) partner than men (Hypothesis 2).

Finally, the present study explored a recent issue uncovered by Eastwick and Finkel (2008; see also Kurzban and Weeden, 2007; Todd, Penke, Fasolo, and Lenton, 2007) who found that people often report partner preferences that are not compatible with their choices in real life. According to these authors people often lack the introspective awareness of what influences their judgments and behaviors in dating situations. In addition, according to Todd et al. (2007) people may be constrained by environmental factors: the available opportunities in the world may not match what people want. People also may be forced to make tradeoffs between preferences on different dimensions or to lower their overall standards in the face of competition from others. The present study aimed to examine another possible explanation for the discrepancy between actual mate choice and desires for a potential mate, i.e. the possibility that people are not consistent in their ideas about what they value in a mate.

The Present Study

In sum, the present study hypothesized that individuals desire mates who are similar to themselves with regard to their personality in terms of the Five Factor Model (Hypothesis 1). We also expected women to desire a more conscientious, extraverted and emotionally stable partner than men (Hypothesis 2). Finally, the present study examined the extent to which people are consistent in their preferences for similar and complementary mates. We examined these hypotheses in a large sample of single individuals who were actively seeking a long-term mate. Especially those people can be expected to be motivated to find a suitable mate and to have well-formed opinions about what their future mate should be like.

Materials and Methods

Participants and Procedure

Participants were 760 members (476 women, 284 men) of a dating site for college-educated singles looking for a long-term mate. Mean age was 41.2 years ($SD = 11.0$, range 19-73). Participants were, by means of an email message, invited to participate in an online study on relationships.

Measures

Participants' personality characteristics

Personality characteristics were assessed by an abridged version of Shafer's (1999) 30-item bipolar rating scale designed to measure the Five Factor Model of personality. Ten items, two for each factor, were selected that Shafer (1999) found to have the highest weighted factor loadings (Openness: uncreative–creative and unartistic-artistic; Conscientiousness: lazy–hardworking and irresponsible-responsible; Extraversion: shy–outgoing and quiet-talkative; Agreeableness: headstrong–gentle and vengeful-forgiving; Neuroticism: at ease-nervous and unagitated-tense). The response scale was a five-point semantic differential type scale ranging from one (the left trait describes me very well) to 5 (the right trait describes me very well). Scores on the two items of each scale were summed to calculate a total score for each personality factor. For each of the five factors, greater values indicated higher levels of extraversion, neuroticism, conscientiousness, agreeableness and openness, respectively. A Principal Components Analysis with Varimax rotation supported the expected five-factor structure. Alphas were: Neuroticism: .67, Extraversion .62, Agreeableness .61, Conscientiousness .62, and Openness .70. These reliabilities are comparable to those found by Langford's (2003) abridged 15–item version of Shafer's scale.

An ideal partner's personality characteristics.

After participants finished filling in the rating scales concerning their own personality, a new online page with questions emerged on the computer screen. Participants were not able to go back to the previous page. This procedure made it hard for participants to compare their ideal partner's personality ratings with those for themselves. Participants were asked to what extent they desired the personality characteristics described above in a potential mate. Answers were assessed on the same five-point scales. The factor structure of the ideal partner ratings was supported in a Principal Components Analysis with Varimax rotation. Alphas were: Neuroticism .69, Extraversion .77, Agreeableness .61, Conscientiousness .59, and Openness .75.

General mate preferences

On a new online page participants were presented with the following question: What do you find more important in a partner: A. that he/she complements you, or, B. that he/she resembles you. Participants were asked to choose between these two alternatives.

Results

To test Hypothesis 1, the prediction that individuals prefer mates who resemble them with regard to their personality, correlational analysis were conducted relating participants' own personality scores to those of their ideal romantic partner. Confirming Hypothesis 1, for all five personality characteristics positive correlations were found ($p < .001$): Neuroticism scores correlated .52, Extraversion scores .51, Openness scores .62, Agreeableness scores .51 and Conscientiousness scores .60. This indicates that people clearly desire a partner who is similar to themselves with regard to the five personality factors. Differences between the correlations for men and women were not significant, with

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one exception: for Conscientiousness, the male correlation was $r = .67$, for women $r = .45$ ($z = 4.33$, $p < .001$; test for independent correlations).

Nonetheless, when explicitly asked what they preferred - a similar or a complementary mate - the majority of the participants (85.7%) reported preferring a complementary partner over a similar one. Men and women did not differ in these percentages ($Chi-square = .02$, $> p$). Within these two groups - those who preferred a similar mate and those who preferred a complementary mate - one significant difference was found between the correlations for Extraversion (r s were $.66$ vs. $.48$, $z = 2.58$, $p < .01$): the preference for a mate who resembles the self in extraversion was stronger among participants who explicitly said to prefer a similar mate over a complementary one. Surprisingly, the other self-ideal partner correlations were not significantly different between these two groups.

To test Hypothesis 2 mean personality ratings for the ideal partner were calculated separately for men and women (see Table 1). Confirming Hypothesis 2, women desired a more conscientious, extraverted and emotionally stable (less neurotic) partner than men. To investigate whether the sex differences in the ideal partner's personality remained significant when controlling for self ratings of personality, five ANCOVAs (one for each personality characteristic of the Five Factor Model) were conducted using participant sex as an independent variable, the ideal partner's personality as the dependent variable and self-ratings of personality as a covariate. Results showed that the gender differences in the ideal mate's personality remained intact when controlling for participants' own personality ratings (F s > 5.02 , p s $< .05$).

Table 1. Means and standard deviations of the ideal romantic partner's personality characteristics.

	Men	Women
Neuroticism	4.82 (1.60) _a	4.27 (1.30) _b
Extraversion	6.40 (1.84) _a	7.56 (1.63) _b
Openness	6.48 (1.86) _a	6.83 (1.94) _a
Agreeableness	7.47 (1.67) _a	7.58 (1.62) _a
Conscientiousness	7.87 (1.62) _a	8.60 (1.24) _b

Note. Columns with different subscripts differ significantly ($p < .01$).

Discussion

The large correlations between individuals' own personality and their ideal partner's personality strongly support the "similarity-attraction" hypothesis: individuals clearly desire a potential partner with a similar personality. In addition to this preference for similarity, as expected, women desired a more conscientious, extraverted and

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emotionally stable partner than men. We also asked participants about their preference for a similar or complementary partner in general. Our study found that individuals often hold seemingly contradictory beliefs about their ideal romantic partner. That is, whereas they wish for a partner who resembles them in terms of personality, when asked about their preferences in general, most individuals indicate that they desire a complementary partner instead of a similar one. A possible explanation for this seemingly contradiction is that individuals have taken the general question about similarity/complementarity to be about other characteristics than personality, such as age, height, intelligence or religion. In that case, our findings are not contradictory at all. That is, both similarity and complementarity may play a role in partner selection, but with regard to different partner characteristics (e.g., De Raad and Doddema-Winsemius, 1992). More specifically, according to Kerckhoff and Davis (1962) initial attraction between partners is based on social and cultural similarities, such as corresponding social status, education or religious background, which yield a field of eligibles. From this field of eligibles individuals choose each other on the basis of complementarity of needs. As discussed in the introduction section, both of these mating conceptions – the preference for similarity and complementarity - may have their own evolutionary advantages, and, as a result, may both play a role in mate selection.

But what if participants did apply the general question about mate preferences, at least partially, to their ideal partner's personality? In that case, people may not be (fully) aware of their true partner preferences or may be confused about their mate preferences. When asked about their preferences for a mate people may partially draw upon lay theories of romantic attraction rather than their true desires for a mate. In general, the notion that "opposites attract" is a relatively popular lay theory of romantic attraction: people often think that individuals who possess complementary characteristics are highly attractive to each other (Barelds and Dijkstra, 2007). In contrast, looking for someone who is similar to oneself may be perceived as "boring". These popular lay theories may confuse people and lead them away from their true partner desires. When individuals become romantically involved, this type of confusion may create all kind of relationship problems and even lead to divorce. In The Netherlands, where this study was conducted, almost 40% of the divorcees report mismatches in personalities as the major cause of their break-up (De Graaf, 2006; see also Amato and Previti, 2003). The present study helps to shed light on this issue.

A limitation of the present study is that the explicit question that asked participants to choose between a complementary and a similar partner did not specifically refer to a potential partner's personality. As a result, as noted before, it is possible that individuals applied the question to other characteristics than a partner's personality characteristics, such as physical attractiveness or intelligence. In our defense, we, however, would like to argue that, because personality is such a central feature of a potential mate (e.g., Klohnen and Mendelsohn, 1998), it is highly likely that individuals applied the general question, at least to some extent, to a potential partner's personality. In addition, because the questions about preferences for an ideal mate's personality followed directly after the personality ratings individuals were likely to be sufficiently primed to think about personality. Another limitation is that our study examined mate preferences of college-educated individuals only. As a result, it is questionable whether our findings can be generalized to the mate preferences of lower-educated people. Nonetheless, in revealing such diverse beliefs about what individuals desire in a romantic partner, the present study may help understand

relationship problems and the puzzling fact why individuals sometimes choose such problematic partners.

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