

4-10-2015

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Recommended Citation

Repository citation: Grody, Samantha; Hames, Nicki; Keen, Ivy; Kleppinger, Allison; and Murray, Tara, "Implicit Desires vs. Explicit Preferences: What Matters More for Mate Selection?" (2015). *14th Annual Celebration for Undergraduate Research and Creative Performance (2015)*. Paper 15.

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Implicit Desires vs. Explicit Preferences: What Matters More for Mate Selection?

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INTRODUCTION

To date, most research on mate selection has focused on identifying what people say they want in a partner, with the assumption that these criteria guide people's partnering decisions and behaviors. For instance, past research has revealed consistent gender differences in mate preferences, with men placing more value than women on physical attractiveness and women placing more value than men on status and resources. But do such differences in reported preferences translate reliably into differences in future behavior? Recent research suggests that this may not always be the case. Despite evidence that greater correspondence between a priori mate standards and partner characteristics is linked to greater relationship quality, other work has found little to no correlation between the traits people report valuing most in a mate and the types of partners they actually select.

One explanation for this lack of correspondence between reported standards and partnering behaviors is that some attitudes that influence people's relational decision-making may not be consciously accessible. However, only one study has examined mate preferences in an indirect (implicit) manner, and this investigation focused only on whether implicit preferences for physical attractiveness predicted evaluations of potential partners in initial encounters. Our research seeks to address these limitations by (a) assessing implicit preferences for three major trait dimensions, (b) examining the extent to which such measures are correlated with explicit standards and related constructs, and (c) testing the extent to which implicit measures can meaningfully predict evaluations of existing romantic relationships.

HYPOTHESES

- **H1:** Implicit and explicit measure of participants' mate standards will be positively, but weakly, correlated.
- **H2:** Explicit, but not implicit, mate standards will be associated with self-ratings on the same attribute dimension.
- **H3:** Both implicit and explicit mate standards will demonstrate theoretically consistent gender differences in men and women's mate preferences.
- **H4:** Greater correspondence between implicit mate standards and reported partner characteristics will be associated with more positive relationship evaluations.

METHOD

PARTICIPANTS

- 139 unmarried individuals, recruited from Hope College (93 women, 45 men, *M* age = 19.09, range: 17-21)
- 54.7% of participants were in a romantic relationship

PROCEDURE

- Participants completed two implicit procedures (IAT and SC-IAT) designed to capture the strength of their spontaneous reactions to different traits in a romantic partner.
- Participants also completed a self-report survey assessing their explicit standards for a long-term partner, their own characteristics, and their evaluations of their romantic relationships (if partnered).

MEASURES

- The IAT (implicit association test) measured people's preference for a category of traits in relation to another category. Positive implicit scores reflect a stronger preference for the first trait category and negative scores reflect a stronger preference for the second trait category.
- The SC-IAT (single category implicit association test) showed people's absolute level of preference for a category of traits. Higher implicit scores reflect a stronger preference for that trait category.
- The evaluative dimension of the implicit procedures was assessed using desirable versus undesirable words.
- The attitude object of the implicit procedures were assessed across three categories (each comprised of six mate characteristics): physical attractiveness (PA), status/resources (SR), warmth/trustworthiness (WT).

H1: IMPLICIT-EXPLICIT CORRESPONDENCE

- Contrary to our hypothesis, SC-IAT and explicit mate standards scores were not significantly correlated. However, for the IAT, there was one significant correlation in the expected direction.
- There is not enough past research to determine the standard relationship between explicit and implicit standards. However, the lack of correlation between the measures is consistent with the one article that has compared the two.

H2: ASSOCIATIONS WITH MATE VALUE

- As expected, explicit mate standards were strongly correlated with self-reported mate values.
- SC-IAT scores were not correlated with explicit mate values. For the IAT, there was not a consistent relationship between implicit preferences and people's ratings of their own characteristics. However, self-reported mate value regarding physical attractiveness was positively correlated with IAT scores on the same dimension.

H3: GENDER DIFFERENCES

- Consistent with past research and evolutionary theorizing, both explicit mate standards and IAT scores demonstrated the expected gender pattern, with men showing a higher preference for physical attractiveness versus status/resources, and women showing a greater preference than men for status/resources and warmth/trustworthiness.
- No significant gender differences were detected in SC-IAT scores, which suggests that men and women may differ in their implicit attitudes toward the *relative*, but not the *absolute*, desirability of the traits in question.
- These findings suggest that the small, yet consistently detected gender differences in men and women's reported preferences for physical attractiveness versus status/resources do not simply reflect social desirability bias and appear to be deeply rooted.

H4: RELATIONSHIP EVALUATIONS

- Analyses run using the 23 men and 53 women who were currently involved in a romantic relationship provide preliminary evidence that the correspondence between people's implicit preferences and their partner's characteristics predicts people's perceptions of partner-fit, relationship ambivalence, and commitment.
- Preliminary analyses also suggest that implicit standards may be more strongly tied to women's relationship evaluations than to men's.
- Implicit standards for physical attractiveness and warmth/dependability seemed to have the most predictive power and tended to predict relationship outcomes that were NOT associated with explicit standard-partner correspondence.

IMPLICATIONS & CONCLUSIONS

- The current study suggests that what people say they want in a romantic partner does not necessarily correspond with what they *unconsciously* desire or prefer, and that the two types of mate standards may each have a unique role in guiding people's partnering decisions and behaviors.
- Consistent with past research, people's own perceptions of their mate value were strongly tied to what they think they want in a partner. However, we see this is not the case with implicit standards, suggesting that people's perception of their own mate value may not be as useful in predicting implicit preferences.
- Although we found evidence for the expected gender differences in explicit standards, as well as implicit standards using a relative metric, it is unclear as to why there were not gender differences in people's implicit preferences when their absolute desirability was assessed using the SC-IAT. Evidence for gender differences in the IAT supports the notion that such differences in mate preferences may be deeply rooted, but the current research does not shed light on the evolutionary versus sociocultural roots of these differences.
- Our preliminary analyses suggest that implicit mate standards may, indeed, explain aspects of people's relationship evaluations that cannot be predicted from their explicitly reported standards; additional analyses using a larger group of partnered men and women need to be conducted to verify this pattern.

EXPLICIT AND IMPLICIT MATE STANDARD CORRELATIONS

	IAT PA/SR	IAT PA/WT	IAT SR/WT	SC-IAT PA	SC-IAT SR	SC-IAT WT
Explicit PA	.28**	.12	–	-.07	–	–
Explicit SR	.04	–	.10	–	.10	–
Explicit WT	–	-.08	-.07	–	–	.06

** $p < .01$

MATE STANDARD AND MATE VALUE CORRELATIONS

	Explicit PA	Explicit SR	Explicit WT	IAT PA/SR	IAT PA/WT	IAT SR/WT	SC-IAT PA	SC-IAT SR	SC-IAT WT
Mate Value PA	.66***	–	–	.23**	.20*	–	-.07	–	–
Mate Value SR	–	.50***	–	.07	–	.07	–	.08	–
Mate Value WT	–	–	.69***	–	-.07	-.06	–	–	.01

*** $p < .001$, ** $p < .01$, * $p < .05$

T-TESTS OF GENDER DIFFERENCES IN MATE STANDARDS

	t-test	Male <i>M</i>	Female <i>M</i>
Explicit PA	2.73**	6.84	6.16
Explicit SR	-3.71***	6.21	7.02
Explicit WT	-3.36**	8.22	8.55
IAT PA/SR	2.16*	.26	.10
IAT PA/WT	2.77**	-.06	-.27
IAT SR/WT	2.60*	-.18	-.35
SC-IAT PA	1.74*	.74	.64
SC-IAT SR	0.79	.63	.59
SC-IAT WT	0.80	.62	.57

*** $p < .001$, ** $p < .01$, * $p < .05$, $p < .10$

SAMPLE IMPLICIT STANDARD-PARTNER TRAIT INTERACTION

