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Kara Dunn

Nicole Hames

Ivy Keen

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Do Unique Mate Preferences Matter?

Comparing the Predictive Validity of Individual Versus Consensual Standards for a Romantic Partner

Faculty Adviser: Dr. Carrie Bredow • Kara Dunn, Nicki Hames, Ivy Keen • Department of Psychology, Hope College

Introduction

Although past research has shown that there is considerable consensus in people's standards for a long-term romantic partner, most researchers have assumed that people's individual standards are of utmost importance in predicting their partnering behavior. But is this really the case?

Despite evidence that greater correspondence between people's mate standards and their partner's characteristics is reliably associated with higher relationship quality (e.g., Fletcher, Simpson, & Thomas, 2000), no one has examined the extent to which people's standards simply reflect a common prototype of a consensual "good partner." Is it really the match between unique standards and their partners characteristics that matters most or is having a partner who meets the consensual prototype for a good partner more important? Accordingly, our research examines that following two questions:

Q1: To what extent do people's individual standards reflect a consensual standard prototype?

Q2: Does the similarity between a person's standards and his/her partner's characteristics predict relationship satisfaction above and beyond the similarity between the "prototypical good partner" and the partner's characteristics?

Method

Participants

- ❖ 359 unmarried individuals who were at least *potentially* interested in marrying.
- ❖ Age: $M=30.24$, $SD=10.92$, range=18-69.
- ❖ Gender: 26.3% men, 73.7% women.
- ❖ Marital history: 80.8% were never married.

Procedure

- ❖ Participants were recruited from college courses, community organizations, and social media websites and were asked to complete a 20-30 minute online survey.
- ❖ Of the 547 people who agreed to be sent an invitation to the follow-up, 359 individuals completed the wave 2 online survey 9-10 months later (response rate=65.63%).

Measures

- ❖ **Mate standards:** We assessed people's standards using 18 characteristics past research has identified as important to people when looking for a long-term romantic partner (e.g. Buss et al., 2001; Fletcher et al., 1999). Through factor analysis, these traits were divided into four distinct dimensions: *physical attractiveness*, *vitality/extroversion*, *warmth/trustworthiness*, and *status/resources*.
- ❖ **Relationship satisfaction:** (4 items; e.g., "I am extremely happy with my current romantic relationship;" $\alpha=.91$).
- ❖ **Relationship Commitment:** (6 items; e.g., "I want to grow old with my partner;" $\alpha=.94$).
- ❖ **Relationship Ambivalence:** (6 items; e.g., "I feel somewhat confused about my feelings towards my partner;" $\alpha=.80$).
- ❖ **Marital Expectations:** (2 items; e.g., "There is no doubt in my mind that my partner and I will get married someday;" $\alpha=.83$).

Q1: How Prototypical Are People's Standards?

- ❖ To create a prototype of a "desired partner," we averaged participants' mate standards on the 18 items and used this pattern of standards as a measure of consensual standards.
- ❖ Using within-person correlations, we found that participants' unique pattern of standards for a marriage partner were moderately to strongly correlated with the consensual partner prototype ($M=.69$).
- ❖ Women were found to have more prototypical standards than men ($r=.19$, $p<.001$), but this was likely due to the disproportionate number of female versus male participants
- ❖ We then created a number of sub-prototypes to examine whether the prototype of a desirable partner might differ based on factors such as gender, marital history, or current relationship status. As seen in Table 1, the partnered vs. single prototypes and previously married vs. never-married prototypes were virtually identical, indicating consensus in what a prototypical "good partner" looks like among these subgroups.
- ❖ Although men and women's consensual standards were highly correlated, the association was lower than those of the other subgroups, suggesting that it might be useful to look a separate male and female prototypes when trying to understand correlates of prototypicality.

- ❖ As shown in Table 2, we found that men's standards tended to become more prototypical as they aged, but not women's.
- ❖ On the flipside, women who were more highly educated reported more prototypical standards than women who had less education, but this was not true for men.

Prototype Correlation	Mean
Partnered & Single	.96
Previously Married & Never Married	.95
Men & Women	.81

	Age	Education
Men	$r=.21^{**}$	$r=-.02$
Women	$r=.09$	$r=.13^*$

* $p<.05$. ** $p<.01$.

Q2: Do Unique Standards Predict Relationship Quality?

- ❖ As seen in the top of Table 3, the match between people's uniquely reported mate standards and their partner's characteristics significantly predicted higher relationship satisfaction, greater relationship commitment, lower relationship ambivalence, and higher marital expectations.
- ❖ Interestingly, a very similar pattern of findings emerged when looking at the match between the consensual prototype and people's partner characteristics.
- ❖ We next tested the extent to which a match with participants' unique standards would predict relationship quality **above and beyond** what can be explained by a match with the consensual prototype (see the bottom half of Table 3).
 - ❖ For **relationship commitment**, **relationship ambivalence**, and **marital expectations**, it was the match between people's partner characteristics and their *unique* standards rather than the consensual prototype that predicted relationship quality when both variables were examined simultaneously.
 - ❖ We found that **both** the unique standards-partner match and the consensual standards-partner match contributed independently to predicting people's **relationship satisfaction**. People were more satisfied the more their partner reflected their unique standards for a mate **as well as** the more their partner matched the consensual prototype of a "good" partner.

	Satisfaction β	Commitment β	Ambivalence β	Marital Expect. β
Unique standards-partner match	.40***	.36***	-.38***	.33***
Consensual standards-partner match	.38***	.26***	-.24**	.26***
<i>The following variables were regressed simultaneously.</i>				
Unique standards-partner match	.28***	.32***	-.35***	.27**
Consensual standards-partner match	.21*	.07	-.04	.10

Note: $N=201$; Regression analyses were run while controlling for gender, age, and relationship length. * $p<.05$. ** $p<.01$. *** $p<.001$.

Implications & Conclusion

Taken together, our results suggest that there is value in examining people's unique desires for a romantic partner above and beyond what we know people generally desire in a mate. In general, these prototypes were fairly similar across subgroups, although we did see some gender differences in the consensual prototype as well as evidence that older men and more well-educated women may hold more prototypical standards than their counterparts. Although past research has often failed to establish a link between people's unique mate standards and who they actually choose for a partner, it appears that a person's unique standards may be more important in determining relationship evaluations and outcomes. Our findings suggest that having a partner who meets your personal standards, along with the standards of what people generally believe to be present in a good partner, may be important for relationship satisfaction. However, having a partner who reflects the consensual prototype for a good romantic partner may matter less than individual standards for future-oriented outcomes such as relationship commitment, ambivalence, and marital expectations.

