

You have 4 minutes to choose your perfect mate

What is the secret to finding the right partner? Two researchers are using unconventional techniques to find out. **Matt Kaplan** investigates the science of speed dating.

Eli Finkel and Paul Eastwick have probably seen more first dates than most. The social scientists at Northwestern University in Evanston, Illinois, have watched hundreds of videos of single people as they participate in a curious, but not unpopular, trend known as speed dating. Two participants spill their souls to each other for a set time, say four minutes, and try to decide whether they might have a future together. When the time is up, they move on to a new partner, sometimes talking to a dozen or more people in a night.

Finkel and Eastwick, who often share play-by-play accounts of the videos they review, have seen enough exchanges to know when one dater, whom we'll call Dan, might blow it. Dan has just transferred to Northwestern and his date, 'Danielle,' asked if he was enjoying the social life at his new university (for those of you who don't speak fluent baseball, a translation of this exchange can be found at the foot of the page):

Dan (whispering and looking around to make sure nobody is watching): Honestly? I'm speed dating right now, that's how much fun it is.

Danielle (laughing): Come on, that's like a dis to the people that are here, regardless.

(Finkel: Oh that's such a hanging curveball.

*Eastwick: Come on dude, swing!)**

*A hanging curveball is a slow-moving, easily hit ball — something that a batter should certainly swing his bat at ...



Dan: No ... you're awesome. I'm just saying ... you know what I mean, though.

(Finkel: Nice! Handled the moment like a master.)

Danielle (smiling): No, OK, I understand. Yeah, definitely.

Dan may not be the slickest of operators, but by taking the chance to pay Danielle a compliment he is showing signals that could mean the start of successful relationship, say Finkel and Eastwick. "Showing unique liking to someone is an effective way to get them to like you," says Eastwick.

From a purely biological standpoint, the success of a partnership hinges mainly on one thing, reproduction. But for humans, who give birth to exceptionally weak, awkward and totally dependent babies, strong pair bonding and the sharing of parental duties can play an important part in the success of their offspring. It is strange, then, that a goal as simple as forming a pair bond could lead to an emotion as complex as romantic love.

Poets and philosophers have plumbed the depths of this feeling for generations, yet are still searching for answers. What do we see in a potential mate that makes our heads spin and our hearts flutter? What do we want in a long-term lover, and do our long-term wants govern our short-term passions? Do men and women want the same thing? Or for that matter, do they even know what they want?

Love will keep us alive

Since the 1940s, social scientists have brought the tools of their trade to bear on such lofty questions. Finkel and Eastwick are now using some of the newest and most controversial techniques. The fast-paced format of speed dating could be exhilarating, daunting or perhaps even dorky for participants and observers alike. Nevertheless, the researchers say that it could help to reveal some of the mysteries behind that uniquely human emotion — love. Indeed, their research, including a paper published today¹, has already started to turn up some surprises.

In the 1940s, when scientists first started to pick at the basis of human attraction, psychologists interviewed single people and asked them

what they would value in a partner. Many of the values were the same in both men and women, but two things stood out in survey after survey. Women valued the wealth of their partner much more than men did, and men valued attractiveness more than women did^{2,3}.

These differences can even make sense in evolutionary terms. A woman looking to have children would want the support of a good provider to help her children succeed in life. Men's seemingly superficial preference for beauty was seen as a proxy for health. Symmetry, skin tone and a favourable waist-to-hip ratio could reasonably point to a woman who would not only survive childbirth, but also pass on lots of healthy genes.

Yet, this is clearly not what drives the actions of everyone looking for love. Take Bob, a trombonist, and his speed-date Veronica.

Veronica: So, trombone ...

Bob: I'm hoping that when I get out [of] here, I can do some work on a cruise line.

(Finkel: That almost certainly doesn't pay very much.)

Veronica (exploding with enthusiasm): That would be an amazing job!

(Eastwick: Yet she likes him anyway!)

Bob: Yeah, I think so too, I want to get out and do some travelling if I can. And then afterwards get into some studio recording work. 'Cause I'm addicted to movie soundtracks.

Veronica: Oh my gosh! I LOVE movie soundtracks!!!

(Finkel: Here we go with the unique liking again. This is a really good sign.

Eastwick: So much for earning prospects.)

So how do researchers go about getting to the root of such behaviour? For many psychological questions, quality data can be collected by dragooning college undergraduates into an experiment for course credit. Even studies on relationships are relatively easy because many couples are eager to take part. The trouble with studies on initial romantic attraction is that they require the right people in the right place at the right time. Finkel and Eastwick thought that speed dating might give them a way around this logistical complication.

The pair was first inspired to use speed dating for research purposes in 2004, when Finkel was running a graduate course on how relationships develop. At the time, there was a reasonable understanding of what made long-term relationships satisfying or dissatisfying and a few studies had looked at initial attraction in live interactions. But "we didn't really know [what makes] people move from being perfect strangers to being lovers", says Finkel. Eastwick, then a student in Finkel's class, suggested that a speed-dating study might be a good way to study the transition because they could look at how well 'gut reactions' predict the course of a relationship. The two decided that an immersive field trial was in order, and went speed dating themselves.

Finkel and Eastwick hit the town and were immediately impressed by the dynamics of the fast-paced dates. "It was amazing how quickly we were making judgements about the people we were meeting," notes Eastwick. "We immediately recognized the scientific potential," adds Finkel.

So they crafted their own speed-date experiment. They recruited 163 undergraduates on campus to sign up for the study and complete a

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— Paul Eastwick

30-minute online survey that explored their preferences in mate attractiveness, earning potential and personableness. At the event, participants were photographed and led through the speed dates as per usual, with one exception. In a short break between dates, the participants were asked to rate the person they just met on the preferences they had indicated in the survey.

Then, when they went home, they filled out an online form saying whom, if anyone, they wished to be matched with, or in the language of the team's articles, who they would 'yes'. If two participants 'yessed' each other, they were informed and asked to rate, over the course of a month or more, their impressions of that person and any interactions they had with them⁴. The surveys allowed the team to monitor relationships as they bloomed or failed — tracking dates, feelings, anxieties and sexual encounters. Even if another love interest enters the picture during the course of a speed-date initiated courtship, the participants indicate them as 'write-ins', who are again rated by attractiveness, earning potential and how personable they are.

Nothing compares to you

But not everyone is impressed with the idea. "Speed dating is a highly artificial situation," says James Giles, a philosopher at the University of Guam in Hagåtña and author of *The Nature of Sexual Desire*. Speed dating, he says, is unlikely to give insight into how normal romantic relationships develop. By depending on people who did not mind — and perhaps even enjoyed — being watched by strangers, they are analysing the behaviour of a very select group that may not have been representative of the wider population, explains Giles.

Although it is a contrived situation, Finkel and Eastwick defend the activity. Nearly everyone has experience of mixing with new people for the first time — at parties, clubs and the like. "A speed-dating event is like a party with a little bit of structure," says Eastwick, "a party where you are guaranteed a few minutes with the most desirable person in the room." "For that reason alone," Finkel adds, "speed dating might appeal to a broader subset of people than those who typically volunteer for psychology experiments."

Of course, the most pertinent feature of the speed date — its speed — might not



Eli Finkel (left) and Paul Eastwick are experts on dating.



seem ideal for making such important decisions. If individuals don't have enough time to evaluate a potential mate, their impressions of mate qualities could be too unformed. Yet research has indicated otherwise.

Fifteen years ago, Nalini Ambady, now a psychologist at Tufts University in Medford, Massachusetts, ran a study in which she showed people silent videos of lecturers teaching and asked them to rate the quality of the lecturer. The clips she used were short, just two seconds long, yet viewers judged the abilities of the teacher with frightening accuracy — students who had taken classes by the lecturers for months posted the same assessments. "It was really surprising how good [the viewers] were at making accurate observations," says Ambady.

The idea that people can make accurate judgements about situations or individuals with a seemingly small amount of information — called 'thin-slicing' — is well supported in the literature.

In similar experimental demonstrations of thin-slicing⁵, the more participants thought about their decision, the less accurate their judgements became, probably because the extra rumination complicated the decision-making process. The findings would seem to be a positive sign for the power of speed dating,

suggesting that enough information can be gathered in a four-minute date to decide whether the person across the table might make a good mate.

Yet remarkably, Finkel and Eastwick have found that speed daters in their experiments often don't pursue people they would consider their ideal, or at least not the types of people they say they are most attracted to. Veronica from the trombone tale, for instance, was in the top 10% of women for how highly she rated her preference for good career prospects. And despite the fact that there were seven economics majors and two future doctors in the room that night, she was drawn to Bob, a trombonist, with low prospects for a lucrative career. They 'yessed' each other when they got home.

More than a feeling

Finkel and Eastwick's latest research also suggests that the theory that women prefer money and men prefer beauty carries little weight, at least in initiating romantic relationships. In a study of 163 students from Northwestern University¹, Finkel and Eastwick set up a series of speed-dating events and before the event asked the students to describe what they were looking for in an ideal partner. Predictably, perhaps, these pre-event ideals mirrored what generations of papers before had predicted. Wealth was more important to women; beauty was a higher priority for men. But something

interesting happened when the students started reporting back about the relationships they were initiating. They hadn't acted on their stated preferences. In some cases, women even enjoyed their dates with attractive partners more than men did.

So ultimately, in addition to being a many splendored thing, love is driven by the context. "Traits don't seem to jump out in isolation during real, social interaction," says Finkel. "By analogy, imagine I ask you whether you like eggs, and you say no. Does that mean you will prefer cake made without eggs? No, you evaluate the cake as a whole." Bob the trombonist is no different. The isolated idea of earning little money is

poles apart from earning little money while pursuing a dream.

"The 'earning-little-money' ingredient when mixed with other ingredients, in this case passion and adventure, changed the final product. We think that's how people evaluate each other as romantic partners — as whole cakes not as individual ingredients," says Eastwick.

The results seem to contradict the evolutionary interpretation. Or at the very least, they suggest that we aren't particularly good at describing what we want. Nevertheless, just because the values people say that they are searching for don't match up with their desires in the moment doesn't make those values meaningless. An alternative explanation, Finkel and Eastwick suggest, is that the values simply do not play a part in the beginning of a relationship, perhaps being more important later on, or that people's assessments of those values in a potential mate are somehow flawed.

Despite the confusion, men and women will probably carry on with the grand experiment. Dan and Danielle's relationship is flourishing. Bob and Veronica, although interested in each other, haven't dated seriously. The rules of love and attraction remain mysterious and a little unpredictable. Of course, who would have it any other way? ■

Matt Kaplan is a science journalist based in London.

"Speed dating is a highly artificial situation."

— James Giles



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