

The Emerging Integration of Close Relationships Research and Evolutionary Psychology

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Abstract

Romantic relationships are a central focus of scientific inquiry within two psychological literatures—those on close relationships and evolutionary psychology—yet attempts to bridge these topics have been surprisingly rare. Recently, several lines of research have begun drawing from the methodological and theoretical traditions of each literature to inform the other. For example, evolutionary perspectives have recently made important contributions to the study of romantic relationships by highlighting the positive effects of negative emotions (e.g., jealousy) and the potentially negative implications of hormonal contraception use. In addition, the emphasis in the close relationships literature on relationship development over time has begun to refine scholars' understanding of the ubiquitous evolutionary psychological distinction between short-term and long-term relationships as well as the classic concept of mate value. These lines of work exemplify how the edges of two intersecting literatures can generate intellectual sparks that ignite both fields.

Keywords

close relationships, evolutionary psychology, mate value, intersexual conflict, relationship initiation

Knowledge increases when multiple disciplines examine the same topic from different perspectives; scholars may be forced to revisit their biases and assumptions, and innovative integrations emerge. Right now, close relationships researchers and evolutionary psychologists are tackling this interdisciplinary challenge. Broadly defined, *close relationships research* is the study of the psychological processes involved in forming and maintaining relationships (typically romantic ones), and studies in this tradition frequently explain what makes relationships satisfying and stable (Bradbury & Karney, 2013; Miller, 2012). A separate literature—concerning the *evolutionary psychological* perspective on mating—seeks evidence for mental adaptations relevant to mate attraction and mate retention that were generated by natural-selection pressures during humans' evolutionary history (Buss, 2005). Attempts to integrate these two perspectives have been rare, which is a striking example of the difficulties of interdisciplinary collaboration given that researchers from these traditions study the same topic (i.e., human mating relationships), work in the same academic departments (e.g., psychology), and attend the same conferences (e.g.,

the Society for Personality and Social Psychology annual meeting).

The first major theoretical innovation that explicitly drew from both fields was the Ideals Standards Model (Fletcher, Simpson, Thomas, & Giles, 1999; Simpson, Fletcher, & Campbell, 2001). This model integrated close relationships and evolutionary perspectives to generate the prediction that people will evaluate their partners more positively to the extent that the partner matches their standards on each of three evolutionarily relevant trait dimensions. In the decade that followed, the Ideals Standards Model proved to be influential within the close relationships literature, but it made fewer inroads in the evolutionary psychological literature, where researchers rarely assessed the outcomes highlighted by the model (e.g., relationship satisfaction, breakup).

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Indeed, several barriers separated these literatures until recently. One barrier involved the measurement and theoretical importance of time: Close relationships researchers have historically prioritized the study of existing couples over periods ranging from weeks to years, and such studies frequently entail labor-intensive longitudinal designs. In contrast, evolutionary psychological studies have often examined participants' reactions to descriptions of partners or hypothetical relationships but rarely examined the ebb and flow of actual relationships over time (Eastwick, 2013). A second barrier was that close relationships researchers tended to characterize relationship processes as normatively beneficial to the extent that such processes predict intuitively positive relationship outcomes, such as satisfaction, forgiveness, or stability (McNulty, 2010; McNulty & Fincham, 2012). But evolutionary psychologists' focus on reproductive-fitness outcomes has emphasized how some seemingly negative outcomes (e.g., dissatisfaction, conflict, jealousy, breakup) might actually be adaptive because they promote reproductive success for the individual (Buss, 2000).

Despite these barriers, a new generation of researchers has achieved fluency in these diverse methods and concepts. As a result, the tools provided by evolutionary psychology have begun to inform the study of actual close relationships, revealing that some ostensibly negative processes have counterintuitive positive outcomes, and vice versa. Meanwhile, close relationships researchers' longitudinal focus on the (often unpredictable) ways that relationships shift and change over time has refined some elements of the evolutionary psychological perspective on mating. Examples of each direction of intellectual influence are reviewed below.¹

Evolutionary Psychology Informs the Close Relationships Literature

Negative emotions can have positive outcomes

In the close relationships literature, negative emotions and conflict typically predict negative outcomes (e.g., breakup), and positive biases toward the relationship or one's partner tend to positively predict relationship satisfaction and stability (Murray, Holmes, & Griffin, 1996; Rusbult, Olsen, Davis, & Hannon, 2001). For instance, people who experience jealousy and engage in *mate guarding* (i.e., keeping an eye out for rivals who show interest in their partner) tend to have unhappy relationships (Guerrero & Andersen, 1998; Guerrero, Hannawa, & Babin, 2011), whereas relationships persevere when people disregard their partners' attraction to rivals (Simpson, Ickes, & Blackstone, 1995).

In contrast, evolutionary psychological theories have long suggested that jealousy, despite being a negative

emotional experience, has the benefit of inspiring mate-guarding behaviors that help people to retain their long-term partners (Shackelford & Buss, 1997). Consistent with the evolutionary perspective, a recent study by Neal and Lemay (2014) offered the first dyadic evidence that one partner's vigilance and jealousy has the positive effect of increasing the other partner's commitment to maintaining the relationship. Specifically, this study found that an individual's greater engagement in mate-guarding behaviors on a particular day predicted *increases* in his or her partner's reported commitment on the subsequent day.

The positive implications of mate guarding in the Neal and Lemay (2014) study present an intriguing paradox when contrasted with the negative implications of these behaviors in prior research (e.g., Guerrero et al., 2011; Simpson et al., 1995).² One promising explanation is that jealousy and mate guarding positively predict relationship-quality outcomes on a day-to-day basis but negatively predict globally measured outcomes. Yet another possibility is that mate guarding has positive effects on one's partner's experience of relationship quality but negative effects on one's own experience. Using an assessment strategy that captures the real-life consequences of seemingly negative behaviors (see also Lemay & Wolf, 2016), Neal and Lemay (2014) highlighted the possibility that, under some circumstances, negative emotions and experiences may actually help to preserve close relationships.

Positive interventions can have negative outcomes

Hormonal forms of birth control (e.g., "the pill") benefit close relationships by aiding in family planning and facilitating spontaneous sexual intimacy (Guida et al., 2005). Yet despite the fact that hormonal contraceptives have these clear benefits, recent research inspired by evolutionary psychological perspectives has demonstrated that hormonal contraceptive use can harm sexual satisfaction and relationship stability under certain conditions (Alvergne & Lummaa, 2010).

This research builds on the notion that there is a hormonal basis for women's sexual attraction to certain male features and behaviors, such as symmetry and dominance (Gangestad, Thornhill, & Garver-Apgar, 2005). Given that contraceptive use changes these underlying hormone levels, women could experience unintended shifts in their sexual attraction to a male partner if they begin or cease using hormonal contraceptives during the course of a relationship (Roberts, Cobey, Klapilová, & Havlíček, 2013). Indeed, multiple recent studies have found that women who altered their use of hormonal contraception (e.g., by starting to use the pill) during the course of their relationships experienced less sexual satisfaction with their partners than did women whose contraception use

did not change (Roberts et al., 2012; Roberts et al., 2014; Russell, McNulty, Baker, & Meltzer, 2014). In other words, interventions that alter women's hormone levels may pose unintended costs for relationship functioning and mate choice (see also Welling, Puts, Roberts, Little, & Burriss, 2012). In sum, evolutionary perspectives have highlighted the need for future research to identify the contexts in which hormonal forms of birth control have consistent costs that weigh against their obvious benefits for relationships.

The Close Relationships Literature Informs Evolutionary Psychology

The psychology of short-term and long-term relationships

The close relationships tradition—with its emphasis on relationship development over time—has also informed evolutionary psychological perspectives on mating. In the evolutionary literature, various theoretical perspectives posit that people use different kinds of strategies and pursue different kinds of mates for short-term versus long-term relationships (Buss & Schmitt, 1993); in other words, there are separate psychological systems that guide mating behavior as a function of the expected length of the relationship. But in the close relationships literature, whether a relationship lasts for a short or a long time is largely a function of dyadic factors (e.g., compatibility, interaction style) that are notoriously difficult to predict until a relationship is well underway (Finkel, Eastwick, Karney, Reis, & Sprecher, 2012). In other words, relationship length is more often an outcome than a predictor of mating behavior, and this distinction sometimes causes the two fields to talk past each other when attempting to determine a priori whether participants are involved in a long-term relationship (e.g., Eastwick, Luchies, Finkel, & Hunt, 2014a; Schmitt, 2014).

A new model called the Relationship Coordination and Strategic Timing (ReCAST) model explains how people can think of short-term and long-term relationships as distinct entities despite the fact that short-term versus long-term relationship outcomes are initially challenging to predict (Eastwick, Keneski, Morgan, & McDonald, 2016). The ReCAST model suggests that the short-term versus long-term distinction in evolutionary psychology refers to different trajectories of romantic interest rather than independent goal-directed strategies among which people select. Figure 1 depicts normative versions of these trajectories. Consistent with the model, data on real short-term and long-term relationships has revealed that the two types of relationships were mostly indistinguishable in the early phases when romantic interest was rising (Eastwick et al., 2016). Long-term relationships eventually exhibited

more attachment, caregiving, and self-disclosure behaviors than did short-term relationships, but this difference typically became apparent months or years after the initial encounter. Thus, the ReCAST model raises the question of whether researchers will be able to find evidence that distinct short-term and long-term psychological adaptations guide behavior when people are actually meeting and starting to evaluate each other as potential romantic/sexual partners. A renewed emphasis on relationship development—preferably beginning from the initial encounter between two potential partners—will clarify the circumstances under which people can be confident that they are in a short-term or a long-term relationship.

Mate value and length of acquaintance

The tenet in the close relationships literature that relationships shift and change over time has also informed research on the classic evolutionary psychological concept of *mate value*. Traditionally, mate value has been conceptualized as the extent to which a mate has desirable traits (e.g., attractiveness, status)—a presumably intrinsic property of an individual that can be assessed by prospective or current mates (Eastwick & Hunt, 2014). Consistent with this perspective, people tend to agree on who does and does not have mate value in initial-impression contexts (e.g., speed dating). That is, there is consensus about who the attractive, intelligent, high-status people are (Asendorpf, Penke, & Back, 2011). But close relationships perspectives emphasize how relationships typically take time to form. For example, one representative sample found that 94% of relationship partners knew each other as friends or acquaintances before becoming romantically involved (Kaestle & Halpern, 2005). This feature of human mating raises the question of whether consensual mate value persists beyond initial impressions into longer periods of acquaintance—the context that sparks most romantic relationships.

Recent research has suggested that consensual mate value plays a less central role in attraction contexts involving long periods of acquaintance than it does in initial-impression contexts. In one set of studies, once opposite-sex friends and acquaintances got to know each other over a few months, they started agreeing less about who had desirable traits such as attractiveness, intelligence, and status (Eastwick & Hunt, 2014; see Fig. 2). After a few years of acquaintance, agreement about each person's desirable qualities dropped to near zero, as did consensus about who would be a good relationship partner. Instead, ratings of opposite-sex friends and acquaintances were largely idiosyncratic: A desirable partner for one person was a terrible partner for another person.

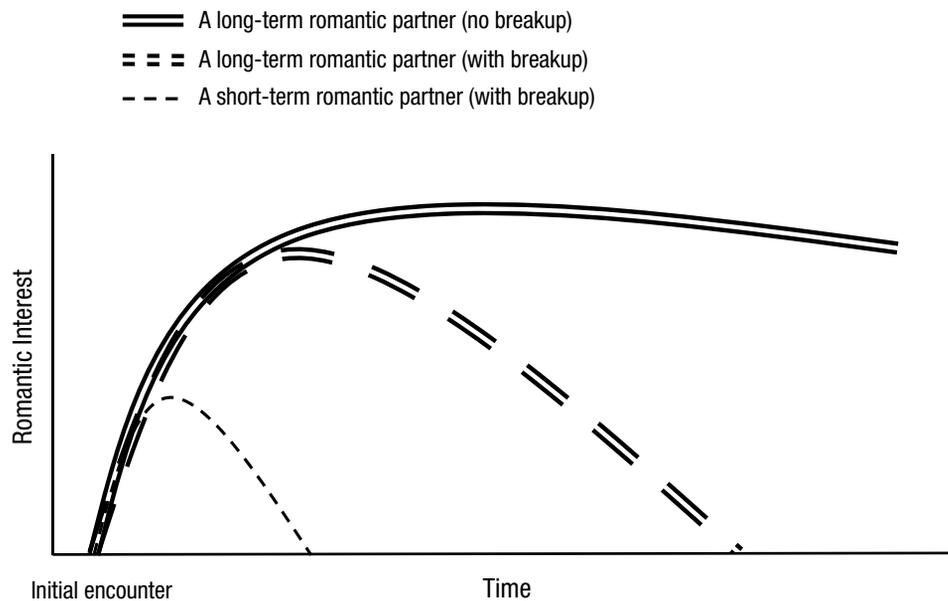


Fig. 1. Theoretically derived trajectories of romantic interest in short-term and long-term relationships according to the Relationship Coordination and Strategic Timing (ReCAST) model. Partners' level of romantic interest in long-term relationships rises over time, then reaches a high peak and plateaus (if it lasts) or falls (if it ends). Romantic interest in short-term relationships rises to a middling level and then falls. Participants' personal experiences with these trajectories should generate short-term and long-term relationship schemas, and when researchers ask participants about their desires or motives for short-term and long-term relationships, these schemas likely inform participants' responses. But in the beginning stages—after an initial encounter, as two people continue to interact with each other—real short-term and long-term relationships may nevertheless be difficult to distinguish because the two types of relationships are very similar in terms of the typical sequence of events (e.g., flirting, then going out together in a group, then the first kiss), romantic interest, and other romantically relevant motivations (e.g., sexual desire; Eastwick, Keneski, Morgan, & McDonald, 2016).

With time, people may gradually lose the ability to assess a potential partner's consensually desirable qualities as they form their own increasingly idiosyncratic positive or negative views.

Furthermore, when agreement about who is desirable is low and judgments of romantic desirability become highly idiosyncratic, the intensity of competition for mates should decrease because people are no longer competing for the same desirable partners. Thus, pairs who are "mismatched" in terms of their consensual mate value should be more likely to form (Eastwick & Buck, 2014). Consistent with this prediction, a recent study found evidence that couples who formed a relationship soon after meeting each other (i.e., when consensual mate value is salient and competition is strong) were more likely to be matched on coder-rated attractiveness than couples who formed a relationship after a long period of acquaintance (i.e., when consensual mate value is obscured and competition is weak; Hunt, Eastwick, & Finkel, 2015). In other words, consensual mate value may

not be a central element of mate selection as people get to know each other well over time (see also Lemay & Wolf, 2016).

The longitudinal implications of this mismatch in consensual mate value remain unclear and deserve additional empirical attention. On the one hand, couples who are mismatched in consensual mate value might be especially susceptible to mate poaching (White, 1980; cf. Feingold, 1988). On the other hand, if mismatched couples nevertheless consist of two people who happen to hold uniquely positive views of each other, these idiosyncratic judgments might later form the foundation for positive biases that aid in relationship maintenance (Murray et al., 1996; Rusbult et al., 2001).

Conclusion: How Can Researchers Integrate Divergent Perspectives?

There are many ways that scholars can advance the continuing integration of these two fields in the coming years.

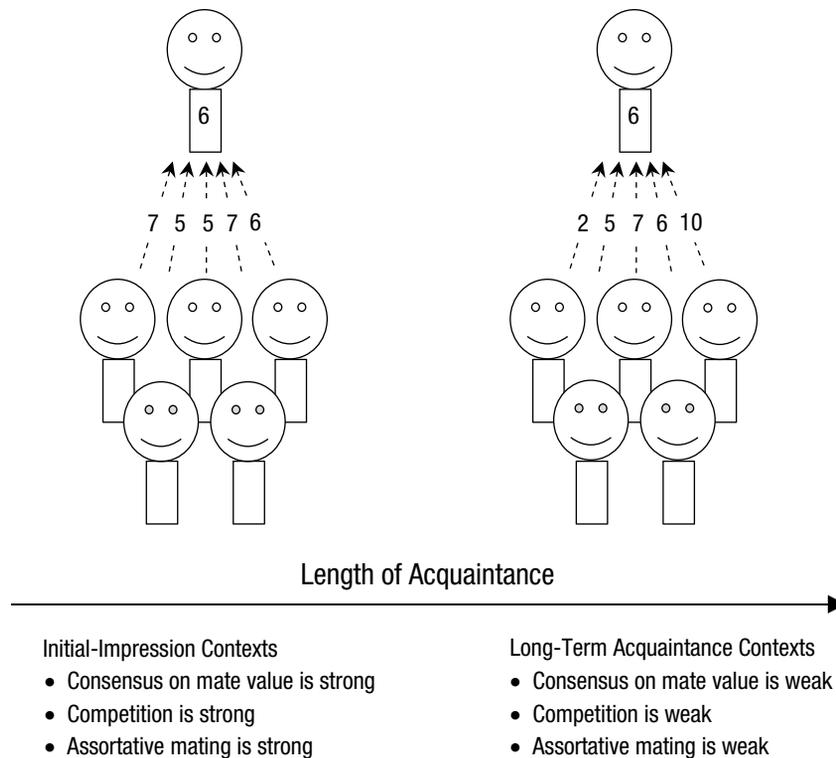


Fig. 2. The effect of length of acquaintance on consensus in mate value. The number 6 on the two avatars at the top of the figure indicates their average mate value (i.e., the average judgments of the raters at the bottom of the figure); the raters' judgments are superimposed on the arrows. In initial-imperson contexts (left side of figure), consensus about a potential partner's mate value is stronger than in long-term acquaintance contexts (right side of figure; Eastwick & Hunt, 2014). As a result, competition for mates is weaker among long-term acquaintances, and assortative mating (i.e., the extent to which two partners "match" in terms of their desirable qualities—e.g., attractiveness) decreases (Hunt, Eastwick, & Finkel, 2015).

One very productive model is the *adversarial collaboration*, in which scholars from different traditions actively work together (typically on a single manuscript) to identify areas of agreement and disagreement, clarify misimpressions, and articulate new predictions that would support or falsify each perspective. For instance, a recent adversarial collaboration (Durante, Eastwick, Finkel, Gangestad, & Simpson, 2016) revolved around yet another important difference between the close relationships and evolutionary psychological literatures: Evolutionary psychology has frequently explored how the sexes achieve better reproductive success by taking advantage of each other (e.g., Goetz & Shackelford, 2009), whereas the close relationships literature has examined how men and women achieve beneficial outcomes by working together and supporting one another (Feeney & Collins, 2015). By situating this difference in perspective along a single continuum of intersexual conflict versus confluence of interest (Fig. 3), Durante et al. (2016) endeavored to create a conceptual tool that can promote cross-disciplinary communication and understanding.

The lines of research described in this article illustrate a number of other fruitful approaches to integration. The jealousy examples illustrate the potential for researchers to deeply consider the question of why some measures (e.g., daily measures of relationship quality) but not others (e.g., global measures) garner support for a set of predictions. The hormonal contraceptive examples illustrate how researchers can draw from the theories of one tradition (i.e., evolutionary perspectives on hormone effects) to identify relational costs and benefits that might never have been highlighted by the theories of the other tradition. The ReCAST examples illustrate that, at times, the two perspectives may posit difficult-to-reconcile mechanisms that require new integrative models (e.g., short-term and long-term relationships correspond to different normative trajectories, not different sets of psychological mechanisms). And the mate-value examples illustrate how a perspective may explain findings better in some contexts than others (e.g., explaining who is attractive in the context of impression formation vs. long-term acquaintance). Together, these strategies provide a research tool kit that can help

	Evolutionary Psychological Literature	Close Relationships Literature
	Intersexual Conflict Versus Confluence of Interest	
Psychological Situation	High Conflict (Noncorrespondence of outcomes)	High Confluence (Correspondence of outcomes)
Indicators of Adaptive Functioning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • People seek extra-pair partners or partners of higher quality than the current partner • People pursue their own interests at the expense of the partner when conflicting interests are apparent • Negative emotions and behaviors (e.g., jealousy, violence) preserve relationships or promote people's own fitness 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • People maintain especially positive beliefs about their current partner/relationship and derogate alternative partners • People make sacrifices for a partner or transform the psychological situation to contain more correspondence of interests • Negative emotions and behaviors (e.g., jealousy, violence) harm relationships
Theoretical Exemplars	Sexual Conflict Theory (Goetz & Shackelford, 2009) Strategic Interference Theory (Buss, 1989)	Attachment Theory (Hazan & Shaver, 1994) Theory of Thriving Through Relationships (Feeney & Collins, 2015)

Fig. 3. A model depicting how men and women achieve adaptive outcomes at different points along a continuum of intersexual conflict versus confluence of interest according to evolutionary psychology and close relationships research (Durante, Eastwick, Finkel, Gangestad, & Simpson, 2016). Evolutionary psychological models have often emphasized that men and women experience conflicts of interest (i.e., outcomes that do not correspond between partners), and adaptive outcomes emerge when people seek their own best individual fitness outcomes by, for example, engaging in infidelity, strategically withholding commitment or sex, or engaging in violence to intimidate or control a current partner. Alternatively, close relationships models have often emphasized that men and women experience a confluence of interests (i.e., outcomes that correspond between partners), and adaptive outcomes emerge when people endure costs to benefit their partners and reappraise conflicts so that mutually beneficial solutions become apparent. The impending integration of close relationships research and evolutionary psychology will require that researchers in both fields consider the entirety of this continuum, as both conflict and confluence-of-interest contexts (a) have evolutionary relevance and (b) affect contemporary close relationships.

scholars to hone and sharpen theories across both the evolutionary psychological and close relationships traditions. The exponential increase in knowledge that becomes achievable when multiple disciplines examine the same topic will emerge when scholars consider both perspectives, honestly engage with data that are inconsistent with existing theories, and work toward an integrative model that propels research on human mating forward.

Recommended Reading

- Durante, K. M., Eastwick, P. W., Finkel, E. J., Gangestad, S. W., & Simpson, J. A. (2016). (See References). A theoretical synthesis that expands upon the intersexual-conflict versus confluence-of-interest continuum depicted in Figure 3.
- Eastwick, P. W. (2009). Beyond the Pleistocene: Using phylogeny and constraint to inform the evolutionary psychology of human mating. *Psychological Bulletin*, *135*, 794–821. An evolutionary analysis positing that features of mating often examined by close relationships researchers (e.g., attachment processes) and features often examined by evolutionary psychologists emerged at a different points in the timeline of human evolution.
- Eastwick, P. W., Luchies, L. B., Finkel, E. J., & Hunt, L. L. (2014b). (See References). A review of the social psychological and evolutionary literatures on ideal-partner preferences, including a discussion of the methodological choices that strongly affect whether studies reveal sex differences or not.

- Fletcher, G. J. O., Simpson, J. A., Campbell, L., & Overall, N. C. (2015). Pair-bonding, romantic love, and evolution: The curious case of *Homo sapiens*. *Perspectives on Psychological Science*, *10*, 20–36. One of the most comprehensive integrations of the close relationships and evolutionary psychological literatures by scholars who work in both traditions.
- Stewart-Williams, S., & Thomas, A. (2013). The ape that thought it was a peacock: Does evolutionary psychology exaggerate human sex differences? *Psychological Inquiry*, *24*, 137–168. A provocative article (with several commentaries) proposing that pair-bonding has been relatively neglected in the evolutionary psychological literature.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

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Notes

1. For an additional integrative example that includes predictions following from close relationships and evolutionary psychological perspectives on ovulatory-shift effects, see Durante et al. (2016).
2. Given that these studies all examined real couples, this discrepancy is unlikely to be due to the fact that some studies

merely assessed people's theories or beliefs about the effectiveness of mate guarding. As it happens, the use of hypothetical (rather than real-life) settings and stimuli has proven to be a shortcoming of some prior evolutionary literatures (e.g., the stated mate-preferences literature; Eastwick, Luchies, Finkel, & Hunt, 2014b).

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