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How Do People Feel About Mates?

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Abstract

Where do positive feelings about a romantic or sexual partner come from? This article offers an overview of—and imposes some structure on—the enormous literature on mate evaluation, from initial attraction to long-term relationship settings. First, we differentiate between research that identifies the factors that predict positive evaluation on average (i.e., normative desirability) and research that attempts to document for whom certain factors are more versus less positive (i.e., heterogeneity in desirability). Second, we review the positive biases that tend to dominate the evaluative process, as well as the promising (and sorely needed) new methods in this research space. Third, we cover contemporary perspectives on the mechanisms that explain how evaluations shift and change over the entire relationship arc. Fourth and finally, we discuss how diversifying the samples and perspectives in mate evaluation research will address novel and generative questions about culture, stigma, and socioeconomic status.

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MATE EVALUATION: AN INTRODUCTION

Feelings are central to romantic and sexual relationships, and they go by many aliases. In the early phases of a relationship, researchers commonly assess constructs like romantic interest or attraction; as a relationship matures, they might assess satisfaction or love. All of these constructs share two core features. First, they are evaluative; that is, they are judgments that reflect varying degrees of positivity versus negativity. Second, these constructs apply to a specific other person (e.g., Maria) who is known personally to the participant and who is—or could be—a romantic partner (i.e., a mate).

This article reviews the state of the research on the topic of mate evaluation. These evaluations have important real-world consequences: They predict breakup and divorce (Le et al. 2010) as well as health and mortality (Robles et al. 2014). For those who wish to develop effective relationship therapies, evaluative measures like relationship quality are the central criterion for assessing how well an intervention works (Bradbury & Bodenmann 2020). Because evaluative measures are relatively cheap and easy to assess (much easier than divorce, breakup, health, or mortality), nearly every study on attraction and close relationships includes them.

Beyond these practical considerations, evaluation is also core to the two foundational theories in this field: interdependence theory and attachment theory. According to interdependence theory, relationships are satisfying when partners work together to pursue meaningful goals and meet each other's basic needs for belonging. This level of mutual dependence entails considerable risks, too, which may heighten one or both partners' sense of vulnerability and desire to pull away from the relationship. To counteract this force, relationship partners commonly demonstrate their

commitment to the relationship by investing in it and engaging in motivated reasoning strategies that help them maintain the relationship in the face of challenges. To the extent that partners feel positive about each other, they are more likely to engage in those biased reasoning strategies, invest in the relationship, and risk dependence (Murray et al. 2006, Rusbult et al. 2000).

According to attachment theory, relationship partners form close, emotionally meaningful pair bonds with each other, and these bonds aid in physiological and emotional regulation. In the same way that young children look to caregivers for encouragement to pursue new opportunities and for support in the face of setbacks, romantic partners look to each other to serve these same functions. The pair bond also motivates relationship partners to (psychologically) defend the relationship against possible external threats. For example, romantic partners tend to derogate alternative appealing partners, and they often come to view their partner as an irreplaceable extension of themselves. To the extent that partners feel positive about each other, they are more likely to support and celebrate each other and defend the relationship against threats (Durante et al. 2016, Feeney & Collins 2015).

Our goal in this article is to organize and summarize the different approaches that researchers have used to study evaluative constructs. Specifically, we address the following questions: What predicts positive evaluations, how do these feelings emerge and develop over time, and what are the big, unanswered questions and challenges currently facing this field? The scope of this review includes research on any and all kinds of mates or potential mates, as long as the mate is a real person whom the participant has met: initial in-person interactions, long-term committed marriages, and all the situationships and relationships in between.

NORMATIVE DESIRABILITY: WHAT DO PEOPLE LIKE IN MATES ON AVERAGE?

Much of the research on attraction and close relationships can be unified under an umbrella question: What do people like when it comes to their romantic partners and romantic relationships? Of course, study designs only rarely ask people to directly self-report "what they like" (the major exception is discussed in the section titled Ideal Partner Preference Matching, below). Typically, studies document statistically significant predictors of an evaluative dependent measure—initial romantic desire or relationship satisfaction—within a given sample. Across the entire field, researchers have compiled a vast and somewhat unruly set of evaluative predictors using this approach.

Finkel (2024) grouped these predictors into 12 separate principles (**Table 1**): courage (the willingness to be vulnerable to someone despite the risks), faithfulness (the willingness to be trustworthy despite temptation), unity (the weakening of the psychological boundaries between the individual and the relationship), instrumentality (the extent to which partners successfully facilitate rather than hinder each other's goal pursuits), attention (focusing attention on a partner and metaphorically "seeing" who they really are), humility (the ability to recognize that one's experiences are subjective and to have empathy for a partner's experiences), commitment (adopting a long-term intent to persist in a relationship), generosity (the tendency to perceive or behave toward a partner in benevolent ways), idealization (viewing the partner and the relationship with rose-tinted glasses), calibration (having expectations that match what the relationship can deliver), zest (engaging in exciting activities together and being enthusiastic about a partner's successes), and embeddedness (having supportive and overlapping social networks outside the relationship). These 12 principles encompass a wide array of purportedly distinct predictors, all of which exhibit positive main effects when used to predict global evaluations of the partner and the relationship. These positive main effects tend to be robust across the populations that relationship researchers typically study, and many of them have been documented experimentally, too.

Table 1 Major classes of predictors of positive relationship evaluations[a]

Principle	Positive evaluations follow from. . .	Specific predictors	Illustrative study
Courage	. . .being vulnerable.	Trust Communal norms Communal strength	Miller & Rempel (2004) Clark et al. (2010) Le et al. (2018)[b]
Faithfulness	. . .being trustworthy.	Sexual fidelity Inattention to alternatives	Stavrova et al. (2023) Miller (1997)
Unity	. . .merging into a single psychological entity.	"We-talk" Shared reality Physiological linkage	Karan et al. (2019)[b] Rossignac-Milon et al. (2021) Prochazkova et al. (2022)
Instrumentality	. . .facilitating each other's goal pursuits.	Goal interdependence Support	Toma et al. (2023)[b] Kane et al. (2012)[c]
Attention	. . .focusing on and "seeing" each other.	Quality time Closeness Feeling understood Unique treatment	Girme et al. (2014) Aron et al. (1997)[c] Gordon & Chen (2016)[c] Anik & Hauser (2020)[b]
Humility	. . .that the partner's perspective is legitimate, even when it deviates from one's own.	Perspective taking Empathy and acceptance	Finkel et al. (2013)[c] Cordova et al. (2014)[c]
Commitment	. . .adopting a long-term orientation to the relationship.	Dedication Constraint Investment	Le & Agnew (2003)[b] Rhoades et al. (2010) Joel et al. (2013)[c]
Generosity	. . .adopting a benevolent orientation.	Gratitude Willingness to sacrifice Conflict skills	Gordon et al. (2012)[b] Righetti et al. (2020)[b] Johnson et al. (2005)
Idealization	. . .viewing the partner and the relationship with rose-tinted glasses.	Positive interpretation Expected future satisfaction Projection	Joel et al. (2023) Baker et al. (2017)[b] da Silva Frost & Eastwick (2024)[†]
Calibration	. . . the match between what one expects/wants and what the relationship delivers.	Partner-preference matching Ideal–discrepancy estimation	Eastwick et al. (2024) Balzarini et al. (2021)
Zest	. . .incorporating excitement and enthusiasm into the relationship.	Arousing activities Capitalization Sexual frequency	Muise et al. (2019)[c] Reis et al. (2010)[c] McNulty et al. (2016)
Embeddedness	. . .cultivating broader social networks to support the relationship.	Network support Network overlap	Sinclair et al. (2015)[c] Kearns & Leonard (2004)

[a]All predictors are positively valenced.
[b]Meta-analytic evidence.
[c]Experimental evidence.
Table adapted from Finkel (2024).

At a conceptual level, these principles are consistent with interdependence theory and attachment theory, as well as with other theories that fit under the interdependence and attachment umbrellas (e.g., risk regulation theory, Murray et al. 2006; self-expansion theory, Aron et al. 2022; communal/exchange perspectives, Clark et al. 2010). However, nothing about any of these theories specifies that there should be 12 distinct principles, as opposed to 2 or 22. In other words, **Table 1** provides a useful organizing heuristic for describing the normatively positive predictors that have been documented to date, but the division itself is ad hoc. By way of contrast, consider the popular trait models in personality psychology. These models posit that effective self-regulation requires

attention to both the stability and the plasticity of the goal-seeking process, and people differ along five dimensions (i.e., the Big Five) in how they approach these self-regulatory challenges (DeYoung 2015, Fleeson & Jayawickreme 2015). Relationship researchers have not yet documented a similar overarching structure that might encompass the universe of plausible predictors of relationship evaluations.

This lack of organization of constructs dovetails with a deep and serious empirical issue within the field of relationship science: It is not clear whether participants themselves can differentiate among the many purportedly distinct predictors that researchers have identified. Across several thousand participants, Kim et al. (2024) measured hundreds of evaluative items that ostensibly tap into more than 30 different relationship constructs. These items included many of the constructs described in **Table 1** as well as measures of relationship quality (e.g., satisfaction) that commonly serve as dependent measures. Bifactor modeling revealed that a single, general factor accounted for the common variance across all these items, suggesting that they were all in fact capturing a global evaluation of the relationship. In other words, even if all of the predictors and constructs outlined in **Table 1** are distinct relationship-relevant processes, participants seem to have great difficulty generating distinct self-reports of those processes, and correlating these measures with relationship quality is effectively predicting relationship quality with itself.

In another set of studies, researchers constructed an intentionally nonsensical relationship scale called Pseudo (e.g., "The daffodil in my relationship is close to ideal," "I enjoy the dolomite that I share with my partner"; Joel et al. 2024). The scale performed well according to the standard scale validation tests that are usually sufficient for demonstrating that a construct is both new and consequential. Specifically, Pseudo cleanly loaded onto one factor in an explanatory factor analysis and fit one factor well in a confirmatory factor analysis. It was moderately associated with other relationship measures and weakly associated with nonrelationship measures. Pseudo showed evidence of predictive validity: Participants with higher Pseudo were more satisfied, committed, appreciative, and trusting in their relationships from week to week, and they experienced positive changes in these variables over time. Pseudo even showed some sporadic partner effects, whereby one partner's Pseudo significantly predicted the other partner's satisfaction, commitment, and trust.

Together, these projects raise important concerns about whether ostensibly separate relationship constructs (e.g., trust, passion, commitment, love, investment) are truly differentiable. Instead, it may be that any relationship-evaluative item captures primarily global, subjective feelings about the relationship (sentiment override; Weiss 1980), rather than any specific aspect of relationship functioning.

It is possible that this issue applies especially acutely when participants complete batteries of self-report items in a single sitting, as is common in most single-shot studies and on the intake/background surveys for most intensive studies. Bifactor models and other, newer, factor analytic approaches have not yet examined whether a single global evaluative factor dominates in other contexts, such as repeated-measures designs (e.g., diary studies) or behavioral observation designs (e.g., coding of conflict interactions). Thus, it remains unknown how many constructs can be differentiated beyond the global evaluative factor in those settings. Additional investigations of this problem—and the discovery of innovative ways to overcome it—will be crucial for the field of relationship science going forward.

HETEROGENEITY IN DESIRABILITY: WHAT DO SOME PEOPLE LIKE MORE THAN OTHERS?

Even as researchers document that factors like goal interdependence, investment, and support receipt predict positive evaluations on average, the magnitude of these associations might differ

depending on who is making the evaluative judgment. Perhaps receiving support is associated with positive evaluations for some people; for other people, receiving support makes them feel incompetent and ambivalent about their relationships (Gleason et al. 2008). This example illustrates heterogeneity: when a given association is stronger for some people rather than others.

Researchers capture heterogeneity in two broad ways. One relies on documenting the presence of variability in a given effect, and the other relies on documenting individual-difference moderators of an effect. The variability approach assesses whether there are meaningful differences across people in the extent to which a given predictor (IV) affects an evaluation (DV). With this approach, the IV can be measured (DiGiovanni et al. 2021) or experimentally manipulated (Bolger et al. 2019). But to assess the extent to which the IV–DV association varies across people, the researcher must estimate the IV–DV effect itself for all participants, meaning that each participant must provide multiple instances of the predictor and the evaluation.

Most relationship researchers who are accustomed to collecting time-series data (e.g., diary reports) have such data on hand, and they likely find heterogeneity to be the rule rather than the exception. For example, a researcher might use "daily support receipt" to predict relationship satisfaction in a diary data set. It is likely that modeling daily support receipt as a random variable—a standard multilevel modeling practice—will yield a significant random variance for the association of support receipt with relationship evaluation. Such a result would indicate that people differ in the extent to which they find support receipt to be desirable; in other words, the daily presence (versus absence) of support receipt has different effects for different people.

The individual-difference moderator approach is different. In this case, researchers attempt to identify specific enduring attributes that explain which participants find a given feature to be desirable versus undesirable. This approach does not require time-series data or repeated measurements of any kind, only that the researcher can identify and assess the relevant enduring attribute: a personality variable, a stable preference, a person's gender, and the like. For example, perhaps an individual difference like self-esteem or attachment style interacts with support receipt to predict relationship satisfaction?[1]

Relationship science articles reporting interaction effects with individual differences are quite common, but several independent lines of inquiry recommend caution when interpreting them. First, when other fields investigate individual-difference moderation effects rigorously, these effects do not fare well. For example, in the closely related field of personality psychology (which uses similar designs, and which commonly examines relationship satisfaction as one of several important life outcomes), researchers have begun the systematic canvassing of individual-difference moderation effects. Generally speaking, even when substantial heterogeneity in the effect of an IV on a DV is present, it is rare to successfully account for this heterogeneity with moderation by individual differences; any robust effects that do emerge tend to be quite small even when anticipated by theory (Kuper et al. 2024, Vize et al. 2023). Furthermore, interactions generally replicate at a considerably lower rate than main effects in large-scale replication efforts, and at a fairly meager rate overall (e.g., 22%; Open Sci. Collab. 2015).

Second, researchers have begun to examine issues related to moderation and replicability in relationship science specifically, and so far, it seems unlikely that relationship research presents an exception to broader trends. For example, when relationship researchers attempt to replicate their own individual-difference moderation effects in independent data sets, the replication interactions are likely to be smaller (for refreshingly transparent examples of such experiences, see

[1] In other words, whereas the first approach identifies the extent of heterogeneity, the second approach attempts to explain where the heterogeneity comes from. Multiple individual-difference moderator effects could, in the aggregate, account for all the variability in a given IV–DV effect.

Lozano et al. 2021, Stanton & Campbell 2016). Also, contemporary machine learning approaches can test large numbers of individual-difference moderation effects simultaneously without overfitting to a given data set. These approaches have revealed that the sum total of all such interactions is likely to account for a very small portion of the predictable variance (3% or less) in initial attraction, relationship satisfaction, or sexual satisfaction (Eastwick et al. 2023b; Großmann et al. 2019; Joel et al. 2017, 2020; Vowels et al. 2022). Future researchers interested in individual-difference moderation should consider preregistration of analysis plans and testing for the same interaction pattern across multiple data sets.

Two Paradigmatic Cases of Testing for Moderation

With respect to statistical moderation, researchers have devoted extra scrutiny to two individual differences in particular. They are (*a*) stated ideal partner preferences and (*b*) gender.

Ideal partner preference matching. Ideal partner preference matching is the one topic area where it is quite common to ask people what they like with items such as: "To what extent is your ideal romantic partner intelligent/attractive/ambitious/etc.?" For attraction and relationship researchers, the question of interest is not (usually) what people report for their ideals per se, but rather whether the match between their ideals and the traits of a current or potential mate predicts evaluative outcomes, like attraction or relationship satisfaction (Eastwick et al. 2014).

These questions provide a natural opportunity to test for individual-difference moderation effects, backed by strong theoretical and logical justification. Both classic evolutionary perspectives and contemporary relationships perspectives imply that ideal partner preferences should represent the "weight" that different people give to different traits (for additional discussion, see Conroy-Beam et al. 2022). If indeed these items function like weights, then they should moderate the extent to which the attribute predicts positive evaluations. For example, a partner's intelligence should predict romantic attraction especially strongly for people who rate intelligence as particularly important in an ideal romantic partner (a positive perceiver ideal × partner trait interaction). To put this moderational test in colloquial terms: What people say they like (i.e., a high self-reported ideal) should correspond to what they actually like (i.e., a strong link between an attribute and an evaluative outcome; Ledgerwood et al. 2018).

Are these interactions robust in attraction and close-relationship contexts? A recent registered report tested this question using a sample of more than 10,000 participants spanning 60 laboratories and 43 countries (Eastwick et al. 2024). These interactions were very small; the average interaction effect size across 35 different traits was $\beta = 0.04$. Echoing the lessons of Kuper et al. (2024) in personality research, these theoretically anticipated individual-difference moderation effects are probably larger than zero, but they are also likely to be very hard to detect with conventional sample sizes.[2]

One could argue that ideal partner preference matching is fundamentally a multivariable problem and, therefore, that the appropriate test requires aggregating across many different trait dimensions (Conroy-Beam 2021). This is an important point. Determining how to conduct the appropriate statistical test, however, has been a long and winding road. Intuitively, it would seem that a researcher could address this question by predicting an evaluative outcome from the match between a perceiver's ideals and a partner's traits when calculated across many traits at once. Perhaps a scholar could create (*a*) an index that correlates a participant's ideals with a partner's traits (i.e., a within-person correlation) or, alternatively, (*b*) a sum of squared difference scores between

[2]To put the average $\beta = 0.04$ effect size in context, the sample size required to detect such an interaction with 80% power is $N = 4{,}475$.

the participant's ideals and a partner's traits (i.e., Euclidean distance). However, these indices are confounded with normative desirability and will therefore correlate with evaluative outcomes for reasons that have nothing to do with preference matching per se (e.g., participants like partners who have positive traits; Rogers et al. 2018, Wood & Furr 2016). Put differently, these indices blend the questions "What is normatively desirable?" and "What is desirable to some people more than others?" into a single measurement glob. Fortunately, computationally straightforward corrections (e.g., mean-centering all items to create a "corrected pattern" metric) can fix this issue (Eastwick et al. 2019a, Wood & Furr 2016).

The registered report described above (Eastwick et al. 2024) used these aggregate approaches, too—both the confounded and corrected versions. When the approaches that are confounded with normative desirability were used, the effect sizes were inflated by a factor of two or more. Still, the approach that removed normative desirability information (i.e., the corrected pattern metric) predicted evaluations at $r = 0.19$.

These findings are cause for both pessimism and optimism about ideal partner preference matching. On the pessimistic front, a correlation of $r = 0.19$ that aggregates across 35 different traits is somewhat modest (i.e., preference matching across a very large set of traits explains less than 4% of the variance in why we uniquely desire some people more than others). Scholars have a long way to go before we can explain why some pairs of people "fit" well as romantic partners and other pairs do not. But optimistically, recall the Kim et al. (2024) problem identified above: In correlational designs, it is very hard to predict relationship evaluations with anything other than relationship evaluations. But in this case, because the normative desirability corrections (Wood & Furr 2016) were applied to the corrected pattern metric effect, we can be confident that this $r = 0.19$ is not an illustration of predicting relationship quality with itself.

Gender as moderator. Some theories of human mating suggest that men and women want different things in the context of their romantic and sexual relationships (Buss & Schmitt 1993). It is therefore possible that gender is an exception when it comes to the challenges of identifying individual-difference moderators. Perhaps men and women will differ in the extent to which different features of partners or relationships predict positive romantic evaluations?

As it turns out, gender rarely serves as a meaningful moderator of evaluative processes, even when major theories suggest that it should. First, men say they value physical attractiveness in a partner more than women do, but a partner's attractiveness does not actually predict romantic evaluations more strongly for men than women. Second, women say they value earning potential more than men do, but a partner's earning potential does not actually predict romantic evaluations more strongly for women than for men. (These two gender moderational effects on average tend to be even smaller than the $\beta = 0.04$ average interactions described above; Eastwick et al. 2014.) Third, in machine learning models in which different variables compete with one another to predict evaluative outcomes, gender does quite badly relative to other individual differences (Joel et al. 2020). Fourth, intuitively it might seem as though men are at especially high risk of relationship instability if they are powerful, high in testosterone, or outshined by their partner's education level, but in reality, associations between these constructs and relational outcomes appear to be similar for men and women (power, Lammers et al. 2011; testosterone, Edelstein 2022; being more educated, Schwartz & Han 2014).

Sidari et al. (2021) present an important exception to this trend, and their results offer a useful effect-size benchmark when it comes to gender moderation. This study tested whether a set of body features (e.g., waist-to-hip ratio, height, shoulder width) predicted romantic attraction differently for men and women at a speed-dating event. Many of the features did show gender differences: Waist-to-hip ratio was stronger when predicting men's attraction to women, and shoulder

breadth was stronger for women's attraction to men. (Intriguingly, even though women commonly say they prefer taller versus shorter partners more than men do, it turned out that both men and women in this study preferred taller partners to a similar extent.) An aggregate analysis of all the measured body features revealed that the gender differences collectively accounted for 2.6% of the variance in speed daters' overall likability (Eastwick et al. 2023a). In summary, this is what an intuitive, theoretically derived collection of gender moderation effects looks like: 2.6% of the variance, which is akin to a correlation of $r = 0.16$. Researchers hunting for moderator effects—especially counterintuitive ones—should calibrate their effect-size expectations accordingly.[3]

Accuracy and Other Matching Approaches

Beyond within-person correlations and individual-difference interactions, other approaches like the social accuracy model (SAM) are becoming increasingly popular in the study of romantic evaluations (e.g., Tissera et al. 2023). The SAM is commonly used in the study of personality accuracy, when researchers are interested in whether positive evaluations are predictable from the match (across a set of traits) between (*a*) a perceiver's perception of Target X and (*b*) Target X's perception of himself/herself. This research has tended to find that accurate personality impressions (i.e., high correspondence between the perceiver's judgments and the partner's self-reports) predict positive evaluations, although this association may be reduced or nonexistent in high-stakes contexts (e.g., first dates) or when the traits in question are undesirable (Kerr & Human 2023).

Finally, a sophisticated new approach for testing similarity effects is response surface analysis (RSA) (Humberg et al. 2019), which improves upon the statistically unsound difference-score approaches of decades past. In brief, RSA assesses whether the point–estimate match between two variables predicts positive evaluations: For example, does a participant feel more positive about a partner to the extent that they are both a 5 on a 7-point attachment anxiety scale? So far, this approach has revealed zero evidence that such matching predicts positive evaluations, either in relationship initiation contexts (Eastwick et al. 2023b, Humberg et al. 2023) or in established relationships (Kim et al. 2021, Weidmann et al. 2023).

HOW DO PEOPLE MAKE RELATIONSHIP EVALUATIONS?

Whereas a large body of research has sought to quantify the predictors and moderators of people's relationship evaluations, a smaller body of research captures the psychological processes that explain how people arrive at those evaluations. One potential takeaway from these empirical studies is that people evaluate romantic partners rapidly, intuitively, and undiscerningly. Given that being in a lasting romantic relationship is an important life goal for many people (e.g., Spielmann et al. 2013), people's relationship judgments and decisions may be broadly geared toward relationship progression and maintenance, and away from rejection and dissolution (the progression bias; for a review, see Joel & MacDonald 2021). Indeed, the existing research on how people evaluate romantic partners across three relationship contexts (i.e., relationship formation, development, and maintenance/dissolution) suggests that romantic partners appear to be graded on a curve at every stage.

Relationship Formation Processes

When it comes to initial partner choice, how do people choose whom to pursue versus reject? A growing set of studies suggests that people are satisficers in this context, rather than

[3]Note that this discussion of moderation does not bear on whether gender affects what people get out of their relationships. For example, men generally get better sex than women (Conley & Klein 2022), and partnership status offers a greater boost to men's (versus women's) likelihood of surviving cancer (Aizer et al. 2013).

maximizers. That is, daters wish to pursue and get to know minimally suitable partners rather than exhaustively search for the best partner. As such, being presented with too many dating options is overwhelming, and participants have an easier time making choices with a smaller set of dating options (D'Angelo & Toma 2017, Lenton & Francesconi 2010, Pronk & Denissen 2020). As with other decision-making domains, people experience choice overload when they encounter too many choices at once, leading them to evaluate their options less effectively and feel less satisfied with their choices. Choice overload from exhaustive mate searching is part of what makes modern dating apps so frustrating (e.g., Frost et al. 2008, Thomas et al. 2023).

Consistent with this satisficing narrative, decision strategies may be geared toward rejecting clearly unsuitable options. For example, in a study in which female participants evaluated dating profiles, participants were more deliberative when choosing whom to reject rather than whom to accept (Long & Campbell 2015). This finding implies that rejecting suitable partners was a costlier error than accepting unsuitable ones, presumably because a decision to reject is (likely) forever, whereas a decision to accept is merely "for now." Such a decision strategy may have been evolutionarily adaptive: Finding a partner would have historically been more important than finding an ideal partner in ancestral contexts, so it would be sensible to keep giving a less-than-ideal partner a second (or third, or fourth) chance. Indeed, in simulation studies, agents assigned "fast and frugal" mating strategies are more likely to find a partner (and therefore propagate in the context of the simulation) than agents with more selective mating strategies (e.g., Neth et al. 2011).

Yet, once people meet (or believe they are about to meet) potential partners in real life, even clearly incompatible suitors can be difficult to reject. In one study, participants rated dating profiles that did not meet their stated dating standards. Although participants initially evaluated these profiles negatively, their evaluations improved significantly following a live interaction with someone (i.e., a trained research assistant) to whom the profile ostensibly belonged (Eastwick et al. 2011). In a related study, participants selected their favorite profile from three options, and then learned that this person possessed at least two of their personal dealbreakers (Joel et al. 2014). When participants were told that the person from the profile was currently in the lab and had chosen them back, most (74%) agreed to go on a date with them anyway (Joel et al. 2014). Such studies suggest that, in more realistic dating situations, people will often entertain potential partners who clearly fall short of their stated standards. Two potential mechanisms are that (*a*) people dislike missing out on potential romantic opportunities (Joel et al. 2019) and (*b*) rejecting romantic suitors is highly uncomfortable, even when their advances are unwanted (Bohns & DeVincent 2019).

Relationship Development Processes

As new dating relationships progress, people evaluate their new partner according to their previously stated standards and goals, and they adjust their standards and goals to align with the attributes of their new partner (Gere & Impett 2018, Gerlach et al. 2019). At the same time, people become rapidly attached to their new partner (e.g., within 3 months of dating; Heffernan et al. 2012). Feelings of attachment and the desire to care for a partner eventually grow quite strong as relationships mature, but they can even feature prominently in romantic entanglements with an uncertain future (Eastwick et al. 2018).

Within the first 6 months of dating, couples frequently move in together (e.g., Sassler et al. 2016). People often make this decision with very little deliberation, which is somewhat surprising given that moving in together is a major investment that acts as a barrier to dissolution (Manning & Smock 2005, Stanley et al. 2006). Furthermore, most romantic couples view the cohabitation transition as a new permanent state that cannot easily be undone without ending the relationship.

Subjective feelings of investment can also be quite high in new dating relationships, even in the absence of serious tangible investments (Joel & Machia 2024). Together, these studies suggest that new relationships tend to develop rapidly, both emotionally and practically. If the early dating phase is the time when people carefully evaluate new partners for long-term fit, they have limited time to do so before a breakup is likely to feel painful and costly.

Relationship Maintenance and Dissolution Processes

In the face of threatening information, people exhibit a variety of positive biases about relationship partners that appear to reflect a motivation to maintain positive relationship evaluations (Murray & Holmes 1999). Coupled people also tend to derogate alternative relationship partners by perceiving those alternatives to be less appealing than they actually are and by using uninviting body language around alternative partners (Karremans & Verwijmeren 2008, Karremans et al. 2011). Experimental manipulations that induce participants to evaluate their partners especially positively seem to enhance this prorelationship bias (Maner et al. 2008).

In contrast to early investment decisions, the decision to end a relationship is a characteristically drawn-out process. Prior to dissolving the relationship, people tend to experience gradual declines in commitment (Langlais et al. 2017) and engage in a period of active, conscious deliberation about whether to break up with their partners (VanderDrift et al. 2009). People frequently hold distinct reasons for wanting to stay in their relationships versus leave (Machia & Ogolsky 2021), and these motivations can be present simultaneously, generating considerable ambivalence (Joel et al. 2018). Furthermore, it is not uncommon for people to end a romantic relationship only to later get back together with the same partner, sometimes repeatedly (Dailey et al. 2009, Halpern-Meekin et al. 2013). In summary, the literature on relationship maintenance and breakup processes suggests that, unlike with early relationship initiation processes, judgments and decisions that lead to relationship dissolution tend to be reached slowly and deliberately.

Of the many progression bias mechanisms reviewed above, some may be especially pronounced in romantic relationships (versus other social contexts), like the early rapid growth of feelings of attachment. Others may be just as common in nonromantic contexts, like the unpleasant feelings that accompany having to reject someone. Investigating the magnitude of these biases in both romantic and nonromantic contexts is an important direction for future research.

Innovative Methodological Approaches to the Study of Process

In general, studying relationship processes is methodologically difficult. Important relationship processes—such as having fun on a date or deciding to break up with a partner—tend to be ephemeral experiences that unfold dynamically and unpredictably, sometimes outside of conscious awareness. Yet, most of the tools in our methodological toolbox—such as hypothetical scenarios, recorded lab interactions, and self-report surveys—tend to capture these experiences in static, contrived, or retrospective ways.

Consider studies of online dating. In one respect, online dating studies are ideal for examining mate choice processes because the partner profiles—whether real or experimenter-generated—are like experimental trials. By intentionally manipulating specific features of the profiles and examining how those changes affect participants' choices, researchers can carefully uncover information about mechanisms (e.g., Brandner et al. 2020). However, this methodological approach puts the participants in a purely evaluative role—as consumers to be impressed. It fails to capture the emotionally evocative scenario of being face to face with a potential romantic partner, when people also tend to be motivated to make the interaction go smoothly and make a good impression. The processes by which people build an impression of a real-life suitor—especially over many repeated

interactions—are considerably more central to how people really choose mates, and they are also much harder to study.

The challenges around capturing relationship processes in real time have stymied our understanding of relationships across their developmental trajectory. Duck (1990) discussed this problem at length 35 years ago, noting that process models of relationships, typically depicted as a series of boxes and arrows, often represent "the black boxes or diagrams as the process when it is really the *arrows* or the *movements* of the circles that should be so characterized" (pp. 17–18, emphasis in the original). He describes a facetious process model, "ingredients → dinner," to highlight how the interesting component of the model is not the ingredients or the dinner but the arrow: How do the ingredients become dinner?

Today, we have a strong understanding of the ingredients in relationship science (e.g., **Table 1**), but we still lack a full understanding of how they become dinner (i.e., evaluations). Researchers will need to triangulate on a given phenomenon using multiple methods in order to capture this dynamic process. Several promising tools in the researcher toolkit are reviewed below.

Experience sampling designs. Experience sampling designs seek to minimize the time lag between important relationship experiences and participants' accounts of those experiences. For example, with daily-diary studies, couples are surveyed about events and experiences in their relationships every day, so that changes in their relationships can be tracked over time with minimal retrospection (Bolger et al. 2003). With ecological momentary assessments, participants are pinged randomly throughout the day so that behaviors, attitudes, and evaluations can be tracked at an even finer-grained (e.g., hour-by-hour) level (Wrzus & Neubauer 2023).

These designs have become popular within relationship science for capturing day-to-day relationship processes, such as within-day effects (on days when *X* occurs in a relationship, *Y* is also more likely to happen) and lagged-day effects (when *X* occurs in a relationship one day, *Y* is more likely happen the next day). Especially promising is the possibility that such designs could integrate with smartphone technology, given that phones naturally sense who else is nearby and for how long (Harari et al. 2016). For example, smartphones might be able to prompt participants to fill out surveys about nearby interaction partners in a seamless and organic way, even after a single initial interaction.

Behavioral approaches. Another realistic approach for capturing how romantic partners feel about each other is to directly observe their interactions. In one common behavioral paradigm, couples are brought into the lab and asked to interact with each other in a specific way. For example, they may be asked to discuss an ongoing conflict within their relationship (e.g., Cross et al. 2017), report on a personal stressor (Jakubiak & Feeney 2019), or share a time when they felt strong love for their partner (Debrot et al. 2021, Impett et al. 2010). Then, trained coders watch videotapes of these interactions and rate the extent to which the partners display various behaviors toward each other, such as effective communication (Melby & Conger 2000), warmth and dominance (e.g., Rehman et al. 2017), affectionate touch (e.g., Debrot et al. 2021, Jakubiak & Feeney 2019), or aggressive behavior (Cross et al. 2017). Similar coding techniques have recently been applied to initial attraction settings, too (e.g., postural expansiveness, Vacharkulksemsuk et al. 2016; laughter, Wainwright et al. 2024). Although behavioral observation has traditionally been an expensive technique, recent technological advances (e.g., automatic processing of behavioral cues without human coders) may make this approach more accessible to a broader swath of researchers (Bulling et al. 2023).

The digital age has once again introduced new ways of capturing romantically relevant behaviors that have a high degree of external validity. Data can be directly scraped from social media websites such as Facebook (e.g., Toma & Choi 2015), Tinder (e.g., Neyt et al. 2019), or

Reddit (Seraj et al. 2021). Participants can submit their text history to researchers for linguistic and content analysis (Brinberg & Ram 2021). Unfortunately, and perhaps due to privacy concerns, it is uncommon for relationship researchers to examine online behavioral data directly, and more common to ask participants to self-report on their media use.

Multiple targets. Relationship researchers are fond of noting that the primary romantic partner holds special meaning in people's lives, for good or for ill. But ironically, they are rarely able to test this assumption, because in relationship research, participants typically complete measures about their romantic partner and only their romantic partner. This is an unforced error, because it is straightforward to also ask participants to complete the same or similar measures about multiple other people beyond the romantic partner alone. In fact, such a practice is common among researchers who study families (Branje et al. 2002), initial attraction (Kenny 2019), and friendship networks (Ruiz-García et al. 2023).[4]

This "multiple targets" approach has considerable advantages, including that it enables participants to use the social relations model (SRM) and related analytic approaches (Kenny 2019). The SRM carves a measure (e.g., X feeling supported by their current romantic partner) into a perceiver component ("X perceives that they are not well supported across their close relationships, on average"), a target component ("X's romantic partner is perceived as supportive by many close others"), and a relationship component ("X uniquely perceives that they are supported by their partner"). The SRM thus separates with mathematical precision the relationship from the two partners who comprise it, placing SRM designs in a position to adjudicate theoretical tensions about the extent to which relational phenomena occur at the level of individual differences or at the level of the dyad itself (Eastwick et al. 2023a, Lakey & Orehek 2011). For example, one study using this design (Lemay & Clark 2008) illustrated that the "communal projection" process is fundamentally a relational phenomenon (i.e., if I have especially good intentions for you, I assume you have especially good intentions for me) rather than an individual-differences phenomenon (i.e., if I have good intentions for others in general, I assume that those others have good intentions for me).

In this light, it becomes clear that scholars who study polyamory (i.e., people who have two or more ongoing romantic/sexual partners) and other forms of consensual nonmonogamy can test theoretically crucial questions that cannot be addressed by the study of monogamous couples (Conley et al. 2017). For example, to what extent is an experience like attachment avoidance or attachment anxiety best characterized as a stable schema that a person possesses about relationships in general versus a dynamic that applies to a particular ongoing relationship? According to research on polyamorous couples, the answer appears to be both, but more of an ongoing relationship dynamic than a stable schema, especially for attachment avoidance (Moors et al. 2019).

Open-ended measures. Another useful empirical approach is asking people to describe their experiences and perspectives in their own words. For example, researchers can conduct semistructured interviews with people about their relationship experiences, then analyze them using qualitative techniques. Qualitative approaches can be particularly effective for improving our understanding of specific relationship experiences (e.g., infidelity; Fife et al. 2022), and because open-ended measures impose few assumptions on the participants, they are useful for illuminating

[4]Of course, for partnered participants who adopt monogamy norms, self-reported sexual attraction (and similar sexual/romantically themed measures) might be quite low for preferred-gender friends and acquaintances. But beyond this obvious mean difference, between- and within-person patterns of differences between measures could be illustrative (e.g., perhaps the difference in participants' sexual attraction to their partner versus their closest preferred-gender friend is especially predictive of their partner's jealousy).

the relationship perspectives of people from understudied groups (e.g., people with autism; Sala et al. 2020).

Some open-ended research techniques have been developed specifically for the study of romantic relationships. For example, participants can graph their evaluations of their romantic relationship (past or current) over time, then verbally explain what led to each change. This method has been used to reveal rich, process-focused information about trajectories of marital intentions (Surra & Hughes 1997) on-again/off-again relationships (Dailey et al. 2009), and new dating relationships (Eastwick et al. 2018), among others. Narrative identity approaches also lend themselves well to the study of romantic relationships. People reliably construct stories and make meaning out of important relationship events in their lives (Wilkinson & Dunlop 2021), and those narratives can be documented using established interview guides and coding schemes (e.g., the Love Life Story Interview; Bühler & Dunlop 2019).

Implicit measures. It is conceivable that evaluations of romantic partners can be activated automatically, without conscious effort (Faure et al. 2024). Therefore, another way to assess romantic evaluations without relying on self-report is through the use of implicit measures. In fact, performance-based computer tasks such as evaluative priming tasks and the Implicit Association Test have been adapted for capturing partner evaluations indirectly (for a comprehensive list of implicit measures in close-relationship studies, see table 1 of Hicks et al. 2021).

Implicit measures may offer important advantages for relationship researchers seeking to circumvent methodological problems like sentiment override (Weiss 1980). Compared with more deliberative measures such as self-report scales, implicit responses may be harder to control and therefore less susceptible to motivated biases (e.g., a desire to portray one's relationship in a positive light). If so, then implicit measures may provide a more accurate or useful estimate of how positively versus negatively a person feels toward their partner (Faure et al. 2020, 2024). However, reliability is a major concern with implicit measures, especially when using implicit measures to capture individual differences and when using evaluative priming tasks in particular (Gawronski & De Houwer 2014)—both approaches are indeed common in relationship science (see table 1 of Hicks et al. 2021). As with self-report relationship measures, the field is ripe for a thorough reexamination of the validity of implicit relationship measures and best practices for their use, to ensure that they are capturing what they are intended to capture.

In summary, relationship researchers have more tools in their methodological toolbox than ever before. However, the usefulness of these tools rests on their validity and reliability. Meanwhile, the broader discipline of psychology is grappling with serious measurement challenges: Measurement development and validation processes are often not taken nearly as seriously as they should be ("measurement schmeasurement"; Flake & Fried 2020). Furthermore, new research has called into question the effectiveness of standard validation techniques, including factor analysis for developing new scales (e.g., Hussey & Hughes 2020), and multiple regression for establishing incremental validity (Wang & Eastwick 2020). Relationship science may be overdue for a similar measurement reckoning. For any measure or method we choose to rely on, we must take the necessary time and resources (and incentivize others to take the time and resources) to carefully ensure the rigor and trustworthiness of that approach according to current best practices.

HOW DO EVALUATIVE PROCESSES CHANGE OVER THE COURSE OF A RELATIONSHIP?

A relationship exists at more than a single moment in time. The way that two people interact with each other often changes, and evaluations commonly shift as a consequence.

As we consider these processes, the SRM distinctions among the perceiver, target, and relationship components will prove critical (Kenny 2019). The perceiver component represents a person's general tendency to be happy with their romantic partners (e.g., some people have high dispositional relationship satisfaction); the target component represents a person's general tendency to make their romantic partners happy (e.g., some people have high mate value and make their partners satisfied in a relationship); and the relationship component represents how uniquely happy a person is with their current romantic partner, above and beyond the perceiver and target components (e.g., some pairs of people fit especially well together). This third relationship component (colloquially referred to as compatibility) is commonly the largest of the three (in terms of variance explained)—especially among as two people get to know each other over time—and it is typically of considerable theoretical interest to relationship researchers (Eastwick & Hunt 2014). Furthermore, this third component may have two categorically distinct causes: the fit between two people's stable attributes and features (i.e., moderation by individual differences) and an interactive history that consists of idiosyncratic norms, rules, and patterns that emerge and evolve as time passes (i.e., target-specific effects; Eastwick et al. 2023a).

How Do Relationships Form?

It may be useful to conceptualize relationships as evaluative arcs that rise, peak, and decline over time (Eastwick et al. 2018, 2019b) (**Figure 1**). Capturing this entire arc in a single study, however, has proven to be a near-Herculean task.

Many thousands of studies capture first impressions, and many thousands of studies capture people who are already in a relationship together. The pervasive assumption in both research articles and textbooks appears to be that the former leads seamlessly to the latter. But in reality, a romantic buildup through a friendship or acquaintanceship process—often spanning weeks or months—is by far the most common route to romantic relationship formation (Stinson et al. 2022).

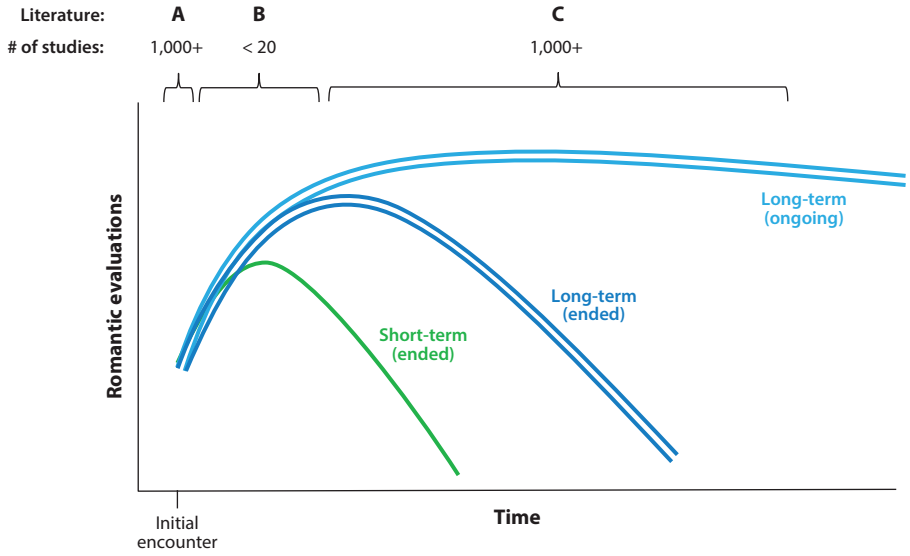

Figure 1

Relationships as evaluative arcs. A refers to the attraction literature, B to the relationship initiation literature, and C to the close-relationship literature. Note that short-term relationships (e.g., one-night stands, flings) rise and fall almost entirely within the stretch of time captured by B (see also Eastwick et al. 2019b).

The interstitial period has not been studied very extensively: Very few studies (i.e., fewer than 20) capture what takes place between first meeting a potential partner and the actual formation of a relationship. This period contains not only the one-night stands and short-term flings that go nowhere (and are theoretically central in many evolutionary theories of mating; Buss & Schmitt 1993) but also the "will they or won't they" moments that affect which relationships become romantic or sexual and which do not. Indeed, to our knowledge, only three published studies (Asendorpf et al. 2011, Eastwick et al. 2023b, Jolink & Algoe 2024) attempt to use prospectively collected relational data (i.e., measures completed by participants about a potential partner before the relationship forms) to predict relationship status (formed versus unformed).

A major challenge is that the base rate of relationship formation seems to be fairly low. In a given population of young singles in contemporary Western contexts, around 30–40% go on to form a relationship during a 6-month period (for additional discussion, see Eastwick et al. 2023b). This amount of sample shrinkage is daunting enough, but it gets much worse if a researcher wishes to collect relational data. When participants report on potential partners they are already romantically interested in (but not yet dating), around 10% of those potential partnerships will turn into a dating relationship. When participants report on strangers, this value drops further, to approximately 1% or even lower (Asendorpf et al. 2011). Scientists need to be prepared to collect a lot of data in order to capture relationships as they take shape.

Social Relations Model Components and Explaining Compatibility

Events during this understudied period of time may have theoretically crucial implications. For example, at some point during this stretch, the stable features of a mate appear to wear off. In other words, a mate's attributes—their traits, features, and other components of mate value—seem to affect a partner's feelings more strongly in attraction contexts than in ongoing relationships. This evidence comes from two sources (**Figure 2**). First, SRM studies using multiple targets provide estimates of the importance of the target component in evaluative measures (i.e., the extent to which raters reach consensus about a given target's desirability). In initial attraction contexts, these consensus estimates are moderate to strong (i.e., 25% of the variance is due to the target), but among people who have known each other over a period of weeks and months, these estimates are small (6%; Eastwick & Hunt 2014, Eastwick et al. 2017, Kenny 2019). Second, machine learning studies attempt to predict an evaluative measure from all the available self-reported attributes of a target, like their personality, preferences, dating history, and other meaningful individual differences. In initial attraction contexts, these variables can account for approximately 20% of the variance in

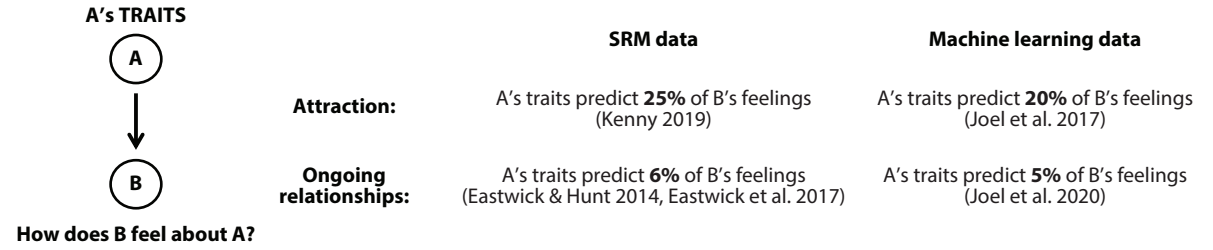

Figure 2

The effects of A's stable traits wear off. For both social relations model (SRM) data and machine learning data, the ability of A's traits to account for B's feelings about A are considerably stronger in attraction contexts than in ongoing relationships. SRM versus machine learning percentages are not directly comparable (i.e., it is not meaningful that SRM studies account for 25% in attraction contexts but machine learning accounts for 20%) because the models are using very different top-down (SRM) versus bottom-up (machine learning) approaches.

an evaluative DV, but in ongoing relationships, this estimate is around 5% on average (Joel et al. 2017, 2020).

Together, these studies suggest that the stable attributes of a mate have a far greater impact on a perceiver's evaluation earlier rather than later in the relationship arc. Furthermore, this shift may begin during the understudied relationship initiation period. Consider a variable like physical attractiveness. It is well established that coder ratings of a target's physical attractiveness predict evaluation powerfully in attraction contexts (meta-analytic $r = 0.37$; Eastwick et al. 2014) but not in established relationships (meta-analytic $r = 0.08$).[5] What happens in the relationship initiation phase, as people are getting to know each other but a relationship has not yet formed? The average effect of coder-rated physical attractiveness on a perceiver's romantic interest is $r = 0.03$, much closer to the established relationship estimate than the initial attraction estimate (Eastwick et al. 2023b). In other words, the powerful appeal of physical attractiveness is already beginning to wane even before a relationship becomes official.

These observations form part of the foundation of mate evaluation theory (MET), which posits that, with time, people's romantic evaluations are shaped less by "who you are in general" and more by "who you are with me" (Eastwick et al. 2023a). In SRM terms, the importance of the target component (i.e., consensual desirability, mate value) yields to the increasing importance of the relationship component (i.e., idiosyncratic desirability, compatibility).

Where exactly does this new source of compatibility come from? Following from the above discussion of individual-difference moderation, MET suggests that interactions among two people's stable attributes likely account for only a modest portion of compatibility. More promising is the idea that people build up idiosyncratic knowledge about their partner with repeated interaction, and this target-specific component plays an increasingly large role in affecting how two people feel about each other (Eastwick et al. 2023a).

Part of this target-specific knowledge is about the experiential discovery of compatibility; for example, people often do not know whether they fit well together sexually at first, and good sexual experiences beget additional sexual experiences and the potential for bonding (Birnbaum & Reis 2019). But part of the process is also about the creation of compatibility: As two people get to know each other, they cocreate patterns and schemas and attempt to build a shared reality together (Rossignac-Milon et al. 2021). Some scholars have referred to this process as the creation of a relationship microculture: a shared, idiosyncratic system of meaning that follows from specific memories and experiences that two people have had together (Finkel 2024). The slow building of evaluatively consequential microcultures can also explain the SRM patterns described above: Relationship variance increases and target variance decreases because people with great traits sometimes build toxic microcultures, and people with not-so-great traits sometimes build wonderful microcultures.

Relationships That Last and Relationships That End

In long-term established relationships, relationship satisfaction scores generally tend to be high; most people are happy in their relationships. A recent meta-analysis found that relationship satisfaction averages (for a given sample) usually fall within the top 25% of the available range of the scale (Bühler et al. 2021). Nevertheless, people feel less and less positive about their relationship partners as time passes. On average, couples who have been together for a decade

[5]These two effect-size estimates are based on a reanalysis of the raw meta-analytic data from Eastwick et al. (2014), using only "objective" measures of physical attractiveness ($k = 44$ and $N = 4{,}555$ for initial attraction contexts; $k = 20$ and $N = 1{,}850$ for established relationships).

are approximately one standard deviation less happy than couples who have just gotten together (Bühler et al. 2021).

This decline effect requires a few caveats and qualifications. First, even if the average couple experiences a decline in their evaluations over time, many couples experience stably high satisfaction; most decline minimally or not at all (Lavner & Bradbury 2010).

Second, some portion of this decline is due to the fact that life generally gets harder as people age into their thirties and forties, as they confront more work- and family-related stressors. Bühler et al. (2021) found evidence of the typical downward trajectory of relationship satisfaction over the first decade of participants' relationships. But their meta-analysis also found another (arguably stronger) trend that operated simultaneously: People experienced a relationship satisfaction nadir around age 40, and after that, relationship satisfaction began to increase. The predicted relationship trajectory for any given person/sample will be a blend or combination of both the relationship duration and age trajectory effects. In other words, the average 35-year-old in a 10-year-long relationship will experience some amount of dissatisfaction both because (*a*) her relationship has lost some of its original luster and (*b*) she is enduring a challenging life phase.

Third, average trends can mask considerable variability and fluctuation in people's experiences; some transitions are tough, and some relationships go through bad spells. Having children, for example, has large (negative) implications for relationship satisfaction when those children are very young, but the implications are not as bad as children get older (Twenge et al. 2003). Ups and downs also carry evaluative implications all on their own: People who report greater fluctuations in their attachment security or perceived support experience steeper declines in satisfaction over time (Eller et al. 2023, Girme 2020). Finally, many people are unwilling to stay in relationships that decline past a certain point. According to a recent large longitudinal study, participants seem inclined to end their relationships when their satisfaction drops below 65% of the total range of the scale (e.g., below a 7 on a 10-point scale), regardless of how long it takes to reach that threshold (Bühler & Orth 2024).

An unfortunate trend in much of the classic research on close relationships is that, once relationships do end, researchers tend to omit those participants from subsequent data collection efforts. In retrospect, such decisions seem shortsighted, because they mean that researchers lack the data to understand how people grow and change from one relationship to the next.

A few studies have recently taken on this challenge. In just a few short years after a breakup, the average person has already formed a new meaningful romantic relationship, which will (on average) yield an early evaluative high followed by a familiar decline over time (Bühler & Orth 2024, Johnson & Neyer 2019). But lest these results imply that people are merely returning to the same relationship treadmill, their relationship satisfaction between one relationship and the next correlate at only around $r = 0.20$. That leaves a lot of room for change: In binomial effect-size display terms (Rosenthal & Rubin 1982), a correlation of this size means that a person in an unhappy relationship has a 60% chance of being in an unhappy relationship on the next go-around and a 40% chance of being in a happy relationship. Scholars who endeavor to study a person's multiple relationships over time stand to gain valuable insights into what a person can do to make one partnership go poorly and another partnership go well.

HOW DIVERSE IS MATE EVALUATION RESEARCH?

The field of close relationships has historically lacked diversity, with most samples consisting primarily of white, American, different-gender, middle-class couples (McGorray et al. 2023, Williamson et al. 2022). Furthermore, most of the research covered in this article—and in the field's major textbooks—was conceived and conducted by scholars in Western contexts at

relatively well-resourced institutions. This lack of diversity raises questions about how well the field's existing findings generalize to broader populations. In this section, we review current and future research directions for improving the inclusivity and generalizability of relationship evaluation research.

The Role of Culture

Relationship science lacks geographical and cultural diversity. According to Williamson et al. (2022), 73% of the 771 studies they reviewed were conducted in the United States, 12% were conducted in other English-speaking countries (e.g., Canada, the United Kingdom), 10% were conducted elsewhere in Europe, and 2% were conducted in Israel. Only 3% of studies were conducted in Asia, and fewer than 1% were conducted in Latin America, Africa, or countries in the Middle East combined.

One implication of this lack of geographical representation is that much of the literature on partner evaluations has a very Western lens. For example, dominant theoretical perspectives on mate selection tend to emphasize individual judgments and decisions by delineating how people evaluate and choose potential romantic partners for themselves. Yet, globally and historically, parents and other family members have played a central role in partner selection (Parkin 2021). Although formally arranged marriages are on the decline, parents still tend to be highly involved in helping their young adult children select spouses throughout much of the world (e.g., Allendorf & Pandian 2016). Thus, any partner evaluation research seems unlikely to be very generalizable if it does not incorporate the role of parental influence. Furthermore, many researchers raised in individualistic mate-selection environments might have trouble generating appropriate research questions about this context and probing their own cultural assumptions.

The task of making relationship science more global brings important methodological challenges. Qualitative approaches—often devalued within mainstream psychological science—are particularly valuable for capturing concrete cultural processes and nuances that are easily erased by quantitative approaches (e.g., Adams 2014, Karasz & Singelis 2009). Furthermore, when scholars do use quantitative methods to compare cultural groups, relevant measures need to be carefully validated to ensure that such comparisons will be meaningful (i.e., that the same scores across groups mean the same thing, which is also called measurement invariance). For example, behavioral coding systems used to examine couple interactions have been validated and used primarily in the United States. Few studies have applied these behavioral coding systems to samples from other countries, so it remains unclear how globally generalizable they are (Friedlander et al. 2019). Self-report relationship measures, many of which were also designed and validated in the United States, need to be translated into other languages and validated in other cultural contexts. Thoughtfully embracing cultural diversity—and in a way that centers the stakeholders from relevant regions—will be a key direction for the field over the next decade.

The Role of Stigma

Even within the United States, people from different social groups experience the dating market quite differently. People may face stigma from potential dating partners due to factors such as having a disability or belonging to a sexual or gender minority group (e.g., Blair & Hoskin 2019, Bresin et al. 2023, Collisson et al. 2020). Race is another relevant factor: People of different racial groups can experience privilege versus exclusion in the dating market. In a recent set of studies using a mock Tinder app, race was one of the best predictors of swiping behavior, with profiles of white individuals receiving greater romantic interest than other racial groups (Chopik & Johnson 2021). In another study of American online daters, researchers examined reported

racial preferences in online dating profiles that had been posted to Yahoo Personals (Robnett & Feliciano 2011). Asian men and Black women experienced the highest rates of exclusion, suggesting that stigma in the dating context is intersectional.

Perhaps owing to homogeneous sampling practices, demographic characteristics have been notably absent from classic theories of partner evaluation. Stigma-related barriers to dating may shape partner evaluations in ways that have yet to be empirically documented. On the one hand, having access to fewer dating opportunities may motivate members of marginalized groups to be more flexible with their dating standards, or to try to match their aspirations to (what they believe to be) the preferences of the advantaged group (Auelua-Toomey & Roberts 2024). On the other hand, marginalized individuals' mate evaluations may include additional considerations, such as avoiding potential partners who are likely to fetishize them (Anzani et al. 2021). Considering and incorporating such concerns remains an outstanding challenge for theories of partner evaluation.

The Role of Socioeconomic Status

Research on close relationships to date has primarily recruited participants from a middle-class economic background (Williamson et al. 2022). However, individuals with lower socioeconomic status (SES) follow markedly different relationship trajectories compared with higher-SES individuals (for a review, see Karney 2021). Lower-SES individuals—particularly those without college degrees—move in with their romantic partners more quickly (Sassler et al. 2016), have children at a younger age (Lundberg et al. 2016), and are less likely to marry and more likely to get divorced (Pew Res. Cent. 2010) compared with higher-SES individuals. They are also more likely to adopt a self-protective orientation in their relationships, which may have downstream negative implications for relationship satisfaction (Emery & Finkel 2022).

Whether SES moderates basic evaluative processes in relationships will likely prove complex, and effect sizes may hinge on the way that both SES and the relational processes in question are measured (for reviews of these emerging complex literatures, see Johnson et al. 2023, Karney 2021). Two principles may be useful for future guidance in this area. First, the stressors associated with low SES could produce exacerbating negative effects. In other words, a given couple may be able to absorb a single challenging stressor, like financial strain or a mental health event, but that same couple would have a much harder time absorbing the many stressors that are commonly associated with low SES (i.e., effects will be quadratic; Rauer et al. 2008). Second, to the extent that moderational patterns are complex, preregistration and direct replications may be necessary to pinpoint the relevant effect sizes.

CONCLUSION

The study of how people evaluate mates—from potential romantic partners to dating partners to marriage partners—is a rich and thriving discipline. We know that these experiences matter in people's lives; we know that people tend to be positively biased in a way that supports positive evaluations; we know that a relationship is not reducible to the two individuals who comprise it. And we have collected a lot of data.

That said, scholars who are interested in this topic have our work cut out for us. If we want to assess self-report measures and capture something other than evaluation, we need to get serious about measurement. If we want to document which individual-difference moderation effects are robust and reliable, we will need large-scale, multilab replication efforts and preregistration to document them persuasively. If we want to better understand the evaluative process, we have to triangulate on the phenomenon of interest using several methodological approaches. If we want to separate the relationship from the two people who comprise it, we need to collect data

from more than those two people. If we want to connect the initial attraction and established relationship literatures, we must get creative with our recruitment and assessment approaches. And if we want to explain how people evaluate mates beyond Western contexts, we must diversify our samples and the scholars who are generating the research questions in the first place. These are exciting challenges for the decades ahead.

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