The Predictive Validity of Ideal Partner Preferences in Relationship Formation: What We Know, What We Don’t Know, and Why It Matters

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Abstract
A great deal of research on interpersonal attraction implicitly assumes that stated ideal partner preferences guide the mate selection, and therefore relationship formation, process. Nevertheless, recent research has yielded contradictory results. Whereas some research has failed to demonstrate that ideal partner preferences influence attraction to actual potential romantic partners, other studies have provided empirical evidence for the predictive validity of ideal partner preferences following interactions with potential romantic partners. A new meta-analysis on the predictive validity of ideal partner preferences concluded that people may not preferentially pursue potential partners that more closely match their stated preferences. This conclusion has significant implications for several empirical literatures that have relied on self-reported ideal partner preferences to test hypotheses. We demonstrate, however, that the majority of the research on the predictive validity of ideal partner preferences, and thus research included in this meta-analysis, focuses on interpersonal attraction or later relationship processes and not on individuals transitioning into actual new relationships. We suggest that research that directly focuses on the transition into actual relationships is needed before firm conclusions can be made regarding the predictive validity of ideal partner preferences in the formation of new relationships.

A great deal of theoretical and empirical work has focused on what individuals are looking for in potential romantic partners (Fletcher, Simpson, Campbell, & Overall, 2013; Simpson & Campbell, 2013; Sprecher, Wenzel, & Harvey, 2008). Numerous studies conducted over several decades and across many different cultures have asked participants to indicate their ideal partner preferences for various traits and characteristics (e.g., Burriss, Welling, & Puts, 2011; Buss, 1989; Buss & Barnes, 1986; Buss & Schmitt, 1993; Feingold, 1992; Fletcher, Simpson, Thomas, & Giles, 1999; Fletcher, Tither, O’Loughlin, Friesen, & Overall, 2004; Kenrick & Keefe, 1992; Li, Bailey, Kenrick, & Linsenmeier, 2002; Penton-Voak et al., 1999; Regan, 1998; Singh, 1993; Sprecher, Sullivan, & Hatfield, 1994; Townsend & Levy, 1990; Wilbur & Campbell, 2010). Implied in this body of research is that ideal partner preferences guide the mate selection process, and thus knowing what individuals say they want in a potential partner should be associated with the actual qualities of their future partners. If such a link did not in fact exist, the results of this large body of research would simply be unable able to provide insight into the process of relationship formation, largely undermining the value of these studies (see Campbell, Pink, & Stanton, in press).

A critical question to ask, therefore, is do individuals form relationships with others who more closely match their stated ideal partner preferences? Surprisingly, there is not a great deal of research addressing this question, and the existing research is inconsistent. Research supporting a link between preferences and actual mate choice (i.e., relationship formation) has typically used retrospective methods to assess if the behaviors in one sample of participants correspond to preferences reported by another sample of participants. For example, Pérusse (1994; see also 1993) obtained reports of actual recent mating behaviors from a large
representative sample of heterosexual men and women and found that men’s status, and women’s age, was associated with their number of partners in the recent past, respectively. Additionally, two large-scale epidemiological studies have shown that more physically attractive women tend to marry men of higher occupational status (Elder, 1969; Taylor & Glenn, 1976). These results are consistent with research suggesting that women particularly value status and resources, and men youth and beauty, in potential partners (e.g., Buss, 1989). Relatedly, using a multi-method approach, Kenrick and Keefe (1992) demonstrated that men both preferred and married women who were progressively younger than themselves as they aged, whereas women both preferred and married men who were slightly older than themselves regardless of their own age. One limitation of this body of research is that it is not possible to determine if the preferences of participants actually influenced their mate choices (i.e., the correspondence between individual’s initial preferences and characteristics of their actual partners was not assessed).

More recently, research has addressed this question by assessing the association, if any, between stated ideal partner preferences and initial attraction to actual interaction partners (i.e., potential romantic partners). Utilizing a speed-dating paradigm where groups of men and women interacted for short periods of time with a number of actual potential partners, Eastwick and Finkel (2008) failed to document evidence that individual’s ideal preferences reported prior to the speed-dating event predicted attraction to their interaction partners (see also Todd, Penke, Fasolo, & Lenton, 2007). Additionally, Eastwick, Finkel, and Eagly (2011) found, in a laboratory setting, that participants were more attracted to a study confederate when his/her written profile was created to more closely match their own ideal partner preferences, but this link disappeared following an actual interaction between participants and the confederate. Interestingly, it seemed as though participants changed the meaning of their ideal preferences to be characteristic of the confederate following the face-to-face interaction. On the other hand, Li et al. (2013) employed online messaging and a modified speed-dating paradigm across three studies (Studies 2–4), manipulating variability in social status and physical attractiveness, and did find evidence that individuals reporting stronger preferences for social status and attractiveness prior to the interaction tasks also valued these traits more in their actual choices (see also Fletcher, Kerr, Li, & Valentine, 2014). Whereas Eastwick and Finkel (2008) suggested that people lack introspective awareness of what influences their mate choices, the results of Li et al. (2013) suggest that perhaps people do possess such introspective awareness.

Firm conclusions, of course, are difficult to make from the results of a few empirical studies. That is one reason why the definitive meta-analysis on the predictive validity of ideal partner preferences for a few different outcomes was recently conducted by Eastwick, Luchies, Finkel, and Hunt (2014). This meta-analysis aimed to help answer two broad questions: (a) Do sex differences in reported mate preferences translate into sex differences in how people evaluate actual potential, or current, partners? and (b) In what relationship context(s) might reported mate preferences predict attraction to actual potential, or current, partners that vary in how closely they match these preferences? The second question more closely aligns with the one we asked at the outset of our paper: Do individuals tend to initiate relationships with others who more closely match their ideal preferences? The results of Eastwick et al.’s meta-analysis suggest that individuals are more satisfied with current romantic partners when they perceive their partners to more closely match their ideal preferences, and single individuals are more attracted to hypothetical partners that more closely match their preferences. The preferences of single individuals, however, were not shown to predict how attracted they were to actual potential partners following live interactions with them. This pattern of results led the authors to the following conclusion:
From our perspective, the central lesson for future studies of ideal partner preferences is that researchers should not assume that the interpersonal implications of ideals are straightforward. That is, just because participants claim to value particular qualities in a mate does not mean that they will preferentially pursue partners who possess such qualities. If the theoretical account of a particular finding contains the assumption (explicit or implicit) that the stated preference for a specific attribute translates into a revealed preference for that same attribute, *the theoretical account could be in need of revision* (Eastwick et al., 2014, pp. 646–647; italics added).

According to Eastwick et al. (2014), therefore, the predictive validity of ideal partner preferences does not extend to relationship initiation or formation, meaning that theoretical and empirical work that has relied on the capacity of ideal partner preferences to predict mate selection may be invalid. This conclusion is already gaining some traction; for example, it partially influenced the selection criteria for studies in a recent meta-analysis on the association between women’s ovulatory status and dating behavior. Gildersleeve, Haselton, and Fales (2014) reasoned

…given that several studies have found that stated preferences are only weakly predictive of real-life dating behavior (see, e.g., Eastwick & Finkel, 2008; Eastwick, Luchies, Finkel, & Hunt, 2014; Todd et al., 2007), it remains an open question whether women have explicit knowledge of and can accurately report on the mate preferences that influence their real-life attractions (p. 32).

Gildersleeve et al. thus created two samples of studies in their meta-analysis, one that was “broad” and included studies relying on stated partner preferences as the primary dependent variable, and one that was “narrow” and did not include these studies. They predicted that the narrow sample would be more likely to yield results consistent with their hypotheses. According to Gildersleeve et al.,

Although the pattern of cycle shifts predicted by the ovulatory shift hypothesis was somewhat stronger in the narrow sample, it remained robust in both of the broader samples. (p. 49).

These results may not be surprising, however, given the research by Li et al. (2013; see also Fletcher et al., 2014) demonstrating that reported partner preferences do indeed influence interpersonal attraction and, perhaps, “real-life” dating behavior.

Meta-analyses do an excellent job of aggregating results across existing empirical research, but the results are generalizable only to the domains investigated by this pooled research. The available research testing the predictive validity of ideal partner preferences falls neatly into one of three domains of research, as identified by Eastwick et al. (2014): (1) evaluating attraction/liking to hypothetical others, (2) evaluating attraction/liking to actual face-to-face interaction partners, and (3) evaluating satisfaction with a current romantic partner. What seems to be missing from this body of research, then, are investigations of the formation process that occurs between domains 2 and 3; that is, studies that go beyond assessing interpersonal attraction/liking in the short-term and focus on the predictive validity of ideal partner preferences for the actual formation of relationships (i.e., the extent to which people enter into actual relationships with those who do or do not match their ideal preferences). Given that the conclusion that stated ideal partner preferences are not likely to influence the process of relationship formation significantly undermines the assumption implicit in much of the research on interpersonal attraction, thus calling into question the value of this corpus of knowledge for understanding human mating, it is imperative to critically evaluate the empirical foundations of this conclusion. In other words, it is important to evaluate whether the studies on relationship “initiation” included in Eastwick et al.’s meta-analysis actually speak to this
process (i.e., the actual initiation of new relationships) in order to (a) determine if researchers can, in fact, draw conclusions about ideal partner preferences and relationship formation, and (b) evaluate the assumption present in the existing literature discussed at the outset of this paper.

Survey of the Available Literature

To better determine if there is indeed a paucity of research on the possible links between ideal partner preferences and actual mate choice (i.e., the formation of new relationships), therefore making it difficult to make firm conclusions on the predictive validity of preferences in this context, we conducted a brief survey of the literature with a spotlight on the relationship status of participants recruited for, as well as the apparent focus of, the body of research addressing the predictive validity of ideal partner preferences. Our survey targeted the research that was included in Eastwick et al.’s (2014) meta-analysis because it is an up-to-date collection that undoubtedly and thoroughly captures the available empirical research investigating the potential predictive validity of mate preferences.2

To conduct our survey, we first obtained copies of all published articles that were included in Eastwick et al.’s (2014) meta-analysis. We, in addition to two objective research assistants, then read each article and made two sets of codes. The first code focused on what we called “participant status,” and the second code focused on what we called “research focus.” Participant status included categories for whether participants were single when recruited, currently involved in relationships when recruited, involved in relationships and asked about how the relationship began/developed, and so forth. Research focus included categories of attraction/liking, later relationship processes, and formation/initiation of new relationships. The coding scheme we used appears in full in the legends of Figures 1 and 2. In these two figures, we present the frequencies of the participant relationship status codes and research focus codes.

The frequencies presented in Figure 1 show that most studies included in the meta-analysis recruited either single participants (30%) or participants currently involved in a committed romantic relationship (52%). Some studies recruited both single and involved participants.

![Participant Status](image)

**Figure 1** Frequencies of participant status in studies reported in the Eastwick et al. (2014) meta-analysis. 1 = single (i.e., not currently involved in a romantic relationship) only; 2 = currently involved in a committed relationship only; 3 = recruited when single and asked about prior dating experiences; 4 = recruited when single and asked over time about actual dating experiences; 5 = recruited when single and followed up until involved in a committed relationship; 6 = recruited when involved in a committed relationship and asked about how the relationship began/developed; 7 = both single and involved in a committed relationship recruited.
(12%), and a few studies recruited single individuals and asked about prior dating experiences (1%), or about current dating experiences (2%), and one study recruited involved participants and asked questions about how the relationship began and developed (1%). Only two studies (Asendorpf, Penke, & Back, 2011; Eastwick & Finkel, 2008), however, recruited participants when they were single and attempted to follow up these participants until they transitioned into a new relationship (2%), and these were the same two studies that were also coded as asking about dating experiences prospectively.

The frequencies presented in Figure 2 indicate that the research foci of the bulk of the studies included in the meta-analysis were either interpersonal attraction/liking (e.g., rating the appeal of hypothetical or real targets, 37%) or later relationship processes (e.g., predictors of relationship quality, 60%). Only three studies arguably attempted to assess the transition into new relationships (3%), and these studies were also included in the “interpersonal attraction/liking” category, as the first goal of the research was to assess reported attraction to particular interaction partners prior to relationships forming. For example, Eastwick and Finkel (2008), as well as Asendorpf et al. (2011), assessed interpersonal attraction following participation in a speed-dating event and then followed up with participants to determine if any had kept in touch, gone out on dates, or formed a relationship. The majority of participants in the Eastwick and Finkel speed-dating events, however, did not appear to transition into new romantic relationships with other speed daters across the one month follow-up period, and according to Asendorpf et al., the probabilities for various kinds of contact in their sample was

\[ \ldots 6.6\% \text{ for a developing romantic relationship 6 weeks after speed-dating, } 5.8\% \text{ for sexual intercourse at any time in the year following speed-dating, and } 4.4\% \text{ for reports of romantic relationships 1 year after speed-dating (p. 22).} \]

Similarly, Sprecher and Duck (1994) paired men and women together for short “dates” and measured interpersonal attraction among other things and also documented if these matched couples subsequently chose on their own to go on a second date, but reported that very few couples did so. This low base rate of actual relationship initiation in these studies therefore makes it very difficult to test the predictive validity of ideal partner preferences for the formation of new romantic relationships. Even the research by Li et al. (2013) did not focus on actual relationship initiation but instead assessed interpersonal attraction.
In sum, according to our survey of the research included in the Eastwick et al. (2014) meta-analysis, the best available empirical research on the predictive validity of ideal partner preferences does not appear to investigate the actual initiation and formation of new relationships. Instead, this body of research focuses largely on interpersonal attraction/liking, as well as processes in the context of committed romantic relationships. Two of the studies that did attempt to measure the likelihood of new relationship formation (Asendorpf et al., 2011; Eastwick & Finkel, 2008) utilized a speed-dating paradigm, and although this paradigm does have the potential to study the predictive validity of ideal partner preferences for both immediate interpersonal attraction and the formation of new relationships, limitations of this design for testing the predictive validity of ideal partner preferences for the initiation of new romantic relationships are that (a) the researchers need to track study participants for a period of time that is long enough to observe the formation of new relationships, and (b) enough new relationships need to be formed between actual speed-dating participants (and not between a participant and someone else that was not involved the study) to provide enough data points for analyses. Other research paradigms could be used to determine the degree to which ideal partner preferences influence actual mate choice (i.e., actual relationship initiation), but to date, it seems that not enough research, if any, exists testing this possibility.

In the absence of systematic research on the transition into new relationships, therefore, it is simply not possible to make any firm conclusions regarding the role, if any, played by ideal partner preferences in the establishment of new relationships. Thus, the conclusions of Eastwick et al.’s meta-analysis, in our opinion, speak with authority on the predictive validity of ideal partner preferences on ratings of attraction/liking to hypothetical others and actual interaction partners, as well as on indices of relationship quality in existing relationships, but are quite tentative on the possible role of ideal partner preferences in the establishment of actual new relationships.

What Is the Predictive Validity of Ideal Partner Preferences in Relationship Formation?

We do not yet have a systematic body of research addressing this question. No research that we are aware of has assessed the correspondence between stated ideal preferences prior to the formation of a relationship and the characteristics of a new relationship partner. Whereas we suggest that Eastwick et al.’s (2014) conclusion is premature given the state of the literature, it is also the case that no strong evidence exists suggesting that ideal partner preferences do play a role in relationship formation. Given that the interpretation of a vast literature on interpersonal attraction largely rests on the assumption that ideal partner preferences do guide actual mate selection, it is critical that research begins to directly test this assumption in earnest.

Where to Go from Here?

The initiation of new romantic relationships is unquestionably a complex process that unfolds over time, context, and even potential partners. Anecdotally, when couples that we know tell the story of how they met and fell in love, the narrative often includes many twists and turns, frequently including the presence of other potential partners who could have prevented the budding romantic relationship from forming. Research that attempts to determine the degree to which ideal partner preferences play a role in this process needs to be sensitive to this complexity and should thus observe individuals over time to witness the mechanisms involved. As an over-time process, therefore, relationship initiation and formation may not be optimally modeled with single- or two-session correlational designs utilizing established romantic couples or live interactions with relative strangers. These paradigms certainly yield interesting and informative findings in the realms of attraction/liking and later relationship processes but may not convincingly account for the process of relationship initiation and formation itself. That is,
attraction/liking in live interactions may predict whether or not one person calls or tries to approach another, but it is currently unclear the extent to which attraction/liking for another person after one interaction results in the formation of a new relationship. Initiating a new relationship might be a unique process in and of itself, one that is not fully accounted for by attraction/liking or later relationship processes research. Consequently, it may be a leap of logic to draw conclusions about relationship initiation processes from the current empirical literature.

More specifically, as Eastwick et al. (2014; see also 2011) suggested, self-reports of ideal partner preferences across a number of traits may not translate into feelings of attraction/liking when actually meeting and interacting with someone; instead, properties of the interaction itself are thought to trump pre-existing ideal preferences during relationship initiation and formation. Using the same logic, it may be equally faulty to assume that preferences for potential partners generated from live interactions (e.g., ratings of attraction/liking) determine whether one starts a relationship with a person. Stated differently, forming positive impressions of a potential partner following a live interaction may not translate into forming a romantic relationship with that person. Moreover, in some cases, two people may find each other quite unattractive and/or strongly dislike each other when they first meet but may eventually desire to initiate a relationship together (examples of this can be seen in nearly every romantic comedy, including When Harry Met Sally, 27 Dresses, and others). Current empirical evidence examining ideal preferences and attraction/liking and later relationship processes does not yet account for these situations.

The type of research designs we suggest to test the predictive validity of ideal partner preferences in relationship formation therefore requires bridging the literatures on interpersonal attraction and relationship processes. Specifically, ideal mate preferences would need to be assessed in individuals prior to them entering a relationship. Furthermore, once individuals enter a relationship, the attributes of the new partner need to be assessed (e.g., peer reports and/or self-reports along the same set of characteristics) as well as how the new relationship progresses over time. This type of research could determine whether people enter relationships with individuals who more closely match their ideal mate preferences (or particular ideal preferences, and not others), and/or whether relationships develop more positively when greater ideal consistency exists. This method could also be altered to focus on different types of “relationships” (e.g., short-term sexual relationships, long-term committed relationships).

This approach certainly has its challenges, including a large time commitment from researchers as well as participants, access to the necessary available resources to support a longitudinal design, the likelihood of some degree of participant attrition, and so forth. Nonetheless, our survey of the presently available literature on the predictive validity of ideal partner preferences in relationship formation strongly suggests that we cannot yet answer the question we posed at the beginning of our paper: Do individuals tend to initiate relationships with others who more closely match their ideal preferences? Research directly addressing this question, however time-, resource-, and method-intensive it may be, is sorely needed, not only to know whether relationship researchers should indeed be revising their theories as suggested by Eastwick et al. (2014), but also to actually test the assumption implicit in decades of existing research.

We close by noting that although we focused in this article on the links between ideal partner preferences and relationship-related outcomes, our observations about the limitations of the current state of relationship initiation research extend beyond the question of the predictive validity of ideal preferences. Stated differently, we highlighted the ideal preferences aspect of relationship formation because it is a topic currently garnering a notable amount of attention in the relationship initiation field, and, as noted above, the answer to this question, whatever it may be, has very important implications for existing and future studies on ideal partner preferences; however, other research questions relating to relationship initiation would benefit from a focus on the actual process itself as opposed to its antecedents (interpersonal attraction/liking).
and consequents (later relationship processes). For example, research could fruitfully explore if there are particular types of events that trigger the transition from pursuing someone to forming a relationship with them. Similarly, the question of factors predicting who we pursue compared to who we actually start a relationship with has yet to be answered. Studies investigating the relationship initiation process could also delve into possible differences involved in initiating short-versus long-term relationships.

**Summary and Conclusions**

In sum, the bulk of research on the predictive validity of ideal partner preferences has focused on interpersonal attraction/liking for hypothetical or actual interaction partners, as well as relationship processes in existing relationships (e.g., reported relationship quality), compared to the actual formation of new relationships. A thorough meta-analysis recently conducted by Eastwick et al. (2014) comprised the best and most up-to-date empirical literature on whether or not the ideal preferences people possess influence actual mate choice. Our survey of the studies included in this meta-analysis, however, found that the vast majority of research (97%) fell into the categories of attraction/liking or later relationship processes, whereas only three studies (3%) measured relationship initiation more systematically. Furthermore, the studies that did measure relationship formation were limited by the fact that a very small number of participants actually initiated relationships (e.g., Asendorpf et al. (2011) found on average less than 7% of participants formed relationships with other study participants following participation in the speed-dating event), meaning it was impossible to assess the correspondence between ideal preferences and the characteristics of new partners.

It seems, therefore, that we now have a good idea of when and how ideal partner preferences predict interpersonal attraction/liking and later relationship processes; however, the current understanding of when and how ideal partner preferences predict relationship *initiation* and *formation* does not yet rest on a solid empirical foundation. Systematic investigation of this process is critical before definitive conclusions regarding the predictive validity of ideal partner preferences in this context are made. Thus, this is a call for research examining the actual process of relationship initiation over and above investigations of attraction/liking and later relationship processes, not only for explorations of the predictive validity of ideal partner preferences but for other facets of relationship formation research as well. To be sure, the study of relationship formation is complex and has its challenges, but there is also an opportunity for high payoff in terms of the insight gained into relationship development processes as they unfold over time. In order to fully understand relationship formation, researchers need to directly assess, rather than infer about, relationship initiation processes.

**Short Biographies**

Lorne Campbell is an Associate Professor at the University of Western Ontario in the Department of Psychology. His research focuses on relationship processes, including initial attraction and relationship maintenance.

Sarah C. E. Stanton is a graduate student in the Department of Psychology at the University of Western Ontario. Her research focuses on relationship maintenance processes, including contexts that activate attachment related concerns of more anxious and avoidantly attached individuals, as well how relationships can have positive effects on relationship cognition, behavior, and physiology.

**Notes**

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Note that the research by Li et al. (2013) and Fletcher et al. (2014) discussed above were not part of this meta-analysis given that these studies were published after the meta-analysis was conducted.

We wish to clarify that we are focusing squarely on the topic of the predictive validity of ideal partner preferences in relationship formation, and not on the empirical investigation of relationship formation overall.

References


