

Self-Worth and Romantic Partner Evaluation and Selection

Lindsay Shaw Taylor¹, Andrew T. Fiore², Coye Cheshire², Gerald A. Mendelsohn¹, Xiaomeng Zhong²
 University of California, Berkeley, ¹Department of Psychology, ²School of Information

BACKGROUND: MATCHING HYPOTHESIS

Equity theory and market views of relationships argue that people are most likely to form relationships with those who bring approximately equal offerings or value to the mating table. On these bases, Walster, Aronson, Abrahams, and Rottman (1966) proposed the original “matching hypothesis,” which states that *individuals tend to seek out romantic relationship partners who approximately equal them in terms of social desirability*.

Empirical tests have repeatedly failed to support the matching hypothesis, demonstrating instead that most people, regardless of their own level of desirability, report that they prefer highly desirable partners. At the same time, however, studies of assortative mating show again and again that people tend to form long-term relationships with people who are similar to them.

The goals of the current research were:

- To test the matching hypothesis using a broader operationalization of “social desirability,” which has been assessed primarily using physical attractiveness in past research.
- To disentangle individuals’ *evaluations of, preferences for, and selection of* potential dating partners.
- To examine individuals’ actual dating behavior outside a laboratory context.

METHOD

Laboratory study

- 184 undergraduate participants (117 female)
- Ps rate their own self-worth (physical attractiveness, self-esteem, likeability, warmth/kindness, genuineness/trustworthiness)
- Create online dating profile describing themselves and their ideal partners
- View profiles (photos/text) of 3 potential partners (low-desirable, medium-desirable, and high-desirable) and rate (1) the targets’ social worth (2) their own interest in contacting the targets (3) the likelihood that the targets would respond favorably (4) perceived similarity to the targets

Online dating study

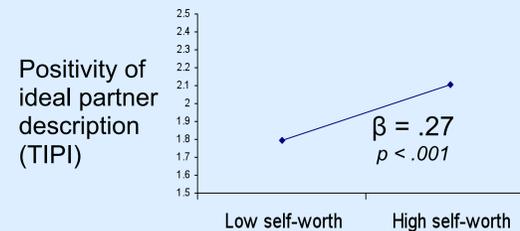
- 414 users of a popular online dating site (205 female)
- In Questionnaire 1 (Q1), Ps rate own self-esteem and personality characteristics they seek in an ideal partner
- Those who say they have met someone online whom they are planning to meet face-to-face complete Questionnaire 2 (Q2), which contains ratings of: (1) actual partner’s personality (2) attraction to partner (3) appeal of partner’s characteristics based on partner’s actual profile posted on the dating site.

PART 1: Do individuals prefer partners whose social desirability equals their own?

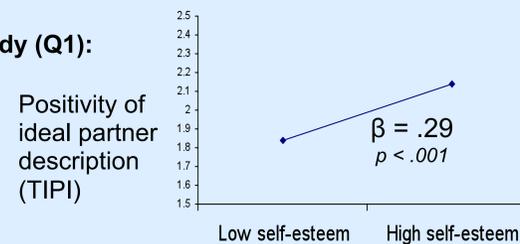
IDEAL PARTNER

Do high and low self-worth Ps describe their ideal partners differently?

Lab study:



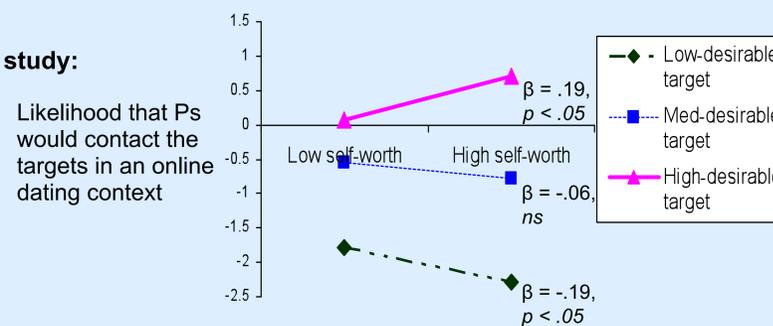
Online dating study (Q1):



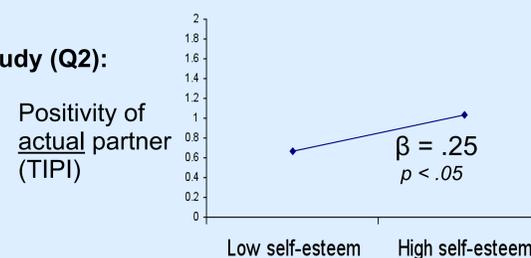
ACTUAL PARTNER SELECTION

Does self-worth predict whom Ps actually select as romantic partners?

Lab study:



Online dating study (Q2):



YES! Consistent with the matching hypothesis, individuals with greater self-worth report wanting more desirable romantic partners. Moreover, they **actually select** romantic partners of greater social desirability.

AND NO! Consistent with past research, all participants demonstrated a strong overall preference for high social-desirability partners.

PART 2: Within target, what predicts interest in selecting a low-desirable and a high-desirable romantic partner?

The same factors are related to willingness to contact low-desirable and high-desirable targets in the lab study:

Correlation between *likelihood of contacting* and:

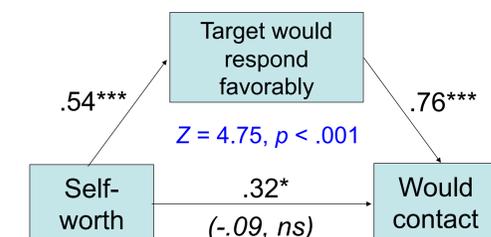
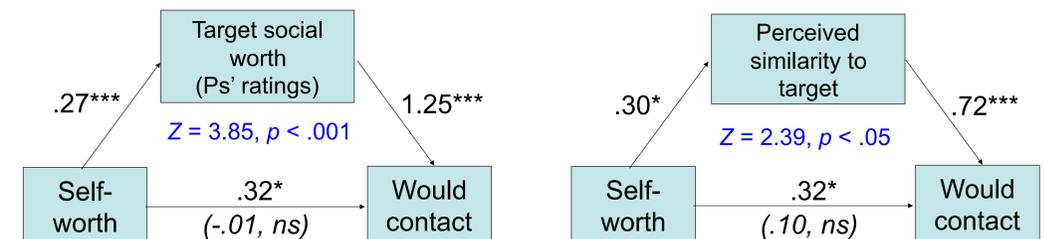
	Target social worth comp.	“Target and I are similar”	“Target would respond favorably”
Low-desirable target	.40*	.54*	.30*
High-desirable target	.48*	.70*	.60*

But each of these variables is related to self-worth **for the high-desirable target only**.

Correlation between *own self-worth* and:

	Target social worth composite	“Target and I are similar”	“Target would respond favorably”
Low-desirable target	-.01	-.06	.08
High-desirable target	.32*	.18*	.38*

For the high-desirable target only:



CONCLUSIONS

- The strongest form of the matching hypothesis is not supported. There is no evidence that low self-worth individuals prefer low-desirable partners **compared to high-desirable partners**.
- HOWEVER, examining the interaction between self-worth and target social desirability supports a weaker form of the matching hypothesis. High self-worth individuals show a greater preference for high-desirable partners **compared to low self-worth individuals**, and vice versa.
- Looking within target, principles of the matching hypothesis appear to apply specifically to high-desirable partners. Preference for low-desirable partners appears to be idiosyncratic and not related to evaluations of one’s own self-worth.