Scotland (UK) Lars Penke

What we want

If you ask singles how their desired romantic partner should be, they are usually able to provide a fairly clear-cut picture. But does this match with their final choice? <u>Dr. Lars Penke </u>researches whether we need to know what we want.

Most often stated preferences do not match actual partner choices at all. For example, when participants of speed datings say they want a warm or wealthy partner before the event starts this has nothing to do with whom they choose to see again, despite people's astonishing ability to judge these attributes fairly well within seconds. Similarly, identical twins, who share their family upbringing and all of their genetic background, are very similar in their self-reported romantic preferences. Their actual romantic partners, however, are so dissimilar that they almost appear to be randomly chosen. Indeed, comparisons with less genetically similar fraternal twins indicate that actual romantic partner choices are about the only aspect of life where people do not differ partly due to genetic influences. The same is not true for reported preferences or any other psychological trait, all of which are substantially heritable.

Sometimes some of these self-reported preferences reflect the partners these people end up with reasonably well. However, this mostly happens for rather trivial attributes like age, or when preferences for characteristics like religiosity, ethnicity or education can be very much traced back to expectations and influences from the family and cultural environment. Overall **people do not seem to know very well what they want when falling in love.** For psychologists this is not too surprising, as they know that people have very limited insight into what is really going on in their minds when they make decisions. Also, unlike most other decisions in life, romantic partner choices usually need to be mutual – it is not enough that one person finds someone who suits his or her preferences; the other person has to be interested as well. Finally, it is important to understand what people really mean when they report they want an 'attractive' or 'kind and understanding' partner. Let us stick with these two examples for a moment.

Attractive

For both men and women physical attractiveness is one of the prime factors that make them interested in seeing each other again after first sight. We now have a good understanding of which objectively measurable features make bodies and faces attractive, including symmetry, masculinity-femininity, smooth skin and otherwise a lack of deviation from the norm. However, **perceived attractiveness in real life boy-meets-girl situations is affected by**

many other factors, including what is available in their surrounding and whom others find attractive. Furthermore, attractiveness to a potential partner can be substantially increased by behavioural signals of interest and contact-readiness, conveyed by dress and styling, a confident and approachable appearance, flirtatious behaviour, smiling and eye contact. It might well be that these often highly targeted signs are what people really want when they say they prefer an attractive partner.

Kind

In a similar manner people looking in a prospective partner for kindness, understanding, warmth and trustworthiness, attributes that are always on top of self-reported preference rankings, might not necessarily pair off with someone with a general personality trait of agreeableness or a cooperative tendencies towards everybody. For one, people generally regard trustworthiness the most desirable attribute in people in general, not only romantic partners. It is simply a prerequisite for social interactions, especially with strangers. **People also tend to categorize others into rough groups of good or bad**, or friend or foe, and then assign overly positive attributes to people they like. This includes assigning obviously contradictory attributes like 'modest' and 'assertive' or 'flexible' and 'orderly' to the same individual, and often goes hand-in-hand with judgments as 'warm' and 'kind'. People simply see people they like in a warm, positive light. In addition there is evidence that people do not necessary want their romantic partners to be kind and understanding towards everybody, but specifically towards them. Overall it seems like people who say they want a kind and warm partner are not necessarily looking for the general personality trait of agreeableness, but for someone who simply loves them back.

So all in all **what people say they want in a romantic partner does not reflect well whom they end up choosing**, especially when self-reported partner preferences are taken at face value. It seems that people lack insight into why they fall in love with someone. This does not mean, however, that romantic partner choice is random or just a result, as has been claimed, of proximity and opportunity. Instead a lot of more subtle, but nonetheless functional, processes seem to be at work when people fall in love, including adjustments of preferences to environmental demands and to one's own popularity as a romantic partner, and female shifts in partner choice criteria across the menstrual cycle that balance sexual attraction and affiliative motives. It is just not necessary that we can fully reflect on them to fall in love.

QUOTE: "We simply see people we like in a warm and positive light"

Lars Penke is lecturer in the Department of Psychology at the University of Edinburgh in Scotland (UK). He has studied attraction, romantic partner choice and sexual behaviour from an evolutionary perspective using a variety of methods, including detailed behavioural observations and speed dating designs. He is co-founder of the Personality and Social Relationships network.