Short Report

Selective Versus Unselective Romantic Desire

Not All Reciprocity Is Created Equal

Paul W. Eastwick,[1] Eli J. Finkel,[1] Daniel Mochon,[2] and Dan Ariely[2]

[1]Northwestern University and [2]Massachusetts Institute of Technology

It is well established in nonromantic contexts that people tend to like individuals who like them (Kenny, 1994); in fact, such reciprocity of liking emerges even when individuals first meet for only a few minutes (Chapdelaine, Kenny, & LaFontana, 1994). Textbooks and common psychological lore frequently extend these findings to romantic liking, but the validity of this extension is unclear. When asked to recall a falling-in-love experience, individuals often report learning of another person's affection shortly before developing passionate feelings in return (Aron, Dutton, Aron, & Iverson, 1989). Nevertheless, such retrospections can be misleading. Moreover, the opposite hypothesis—that potential romantic partners who play "hard to get" are desirable and individuals who demonstrate unconcealed romantic interest seem desperate and unappealing—is also plausible (for discussion, see Walster, Walster, Piliavin, & Schmidt, 1973).

One useful perspective on reciprocal liking derives from Kenny's social relations model (Kenny, 1994; Kenny & Nasby, 1980). This model distinguishes between two statistically independent correlational indicators of reciprocity: *dyadic*, which refers to liking that is shared uniquely between two individuals, and *generalized*, which refers to the tendency for people who generally like others to be liked themselves. Although correlations of nonromantic liking ratings demonstrate both positive dyadic and positive generalized reciprocity (Kenny, 1994), we hypothesized that romantic reciprocity would prove more nuanced. In a romantic setting, the dyadic-reciprocity correlation should remain positive, but the generalized-reciprocity correlation is likely to be negative. Although someone might indeed be likeable if he or she were to demonstrate platonic liking for many other people (Folkes & Sears, 1977), demonstrating romantic liking for many others could convey unselectivity and even desperation. Therefore, if expressing romantic desire emerges as a generalized tendency rather than a unique response to a particular individual, it may be *anti*effective at inducing another person's desire.

Address correspondence to Paul Eastwick or Eli Finkel, Northwestern University, Department of Psychology, 2029 Sheridan Rd., Room 102, Evanston, IL 60208, e-mail: p-eastwick@northwestern.edu or finkel@northwestern.edu.

METHOD

To explore reciprocity dynamics in the opening minutes of romantic encounters, we employed *speed-dating*, a popular activity in which romantically available individuals meet and evaluate one another on brief "dates." We conducted seven speed-dating sessions for 156[1] undergraduate students (75 female; mean age = 19.6 years; see Finkel, Eastwick, & Matthews, 2007, for greater methodological detail). At the event, participants had 4-min speed-dates with 9 to 13 opposite-sex individuals and completed a 2-min Interaction Record immediately after each date. In addition, after returning home, participants recorded on a Web site whether they would ("yes") or would not ("no") be interested in meeting again each person they had speed-dated; "matches" (mutual "yes" responses) were given the ability to contact one another.

On each Interaction Record, participants used 9-point rating scales (1 = *strongly disagree*, 9 = *strongly agree*) to complete a three-item measure of *romantic desire* that served as our dependent variable ("I really liked my interaction partner," "I was sexually attracted to my interaction partner," and "I am likely to say 'yes' to my interaction partner"; $\alpha = .88$), plus a three-item measure of felt *chemistry* ("My interaction partner and I had a real connection," ". . . seemed to have similar personalities," and ". . . seemed to have a lot in common"; $\alpha = .91$). Participants also completed a one-item measure assessing the date's *perceived unselectivity* ("To what percentage of the other people here today will this person say 'yes'?").

[1]We randomly excluded 7 additional participants because of software constraints.

TABLE 1

Correlations Between Participants' Romantic Desire and Their Speed-Dating Partners' Romantic Desire (Reciprocity) and Felt Chemistry

	Speed-dating partner's report	
Measure of romantic desire	Romantic desire	Chemistry
Dyadic	.14***	.20***
Generalized[a]	−.41**	−.32*

Note. For romantic desire and chemistry, we calculated each participant's *actor effect* (e.g., the average amount that a participant desired all of his or her interaction partners), *partner effect* (e.g., the average amount that the participant was desired by all interaction partners), and *relationship effects* (e.g., the amount that the participant desired each particular partner independently of the participant's actor effect and his or her partner's partner effect). Then, these actor, partner, and relationship effects were used to calculate the relevant correlations. For example, the correlation between the two romantic-desire relationship effects (per dyad) across all dyads is called dyadic reciprocity, and the correlation between each participant's romantic-desire actor and partner effects is called generalized reciprocity.

[a]As is convention, the generalized correlations are disattenuated.

*$p \leq .05$, $p_{rep} = .875$. **$p \leq .01$, $p_{rep} = .950$. ***$p \leq .001$, $p_{rep} = .985$.

RESULTS

Results are presented in Table 1. As has been found in nonromantic contexts, dyadic reciprocity was positive, $r = .14$, $p = .001$, $p_{rep} = .985$: If a participant uniquely desired a particular partner, the partner tended to reciprocate that unique desire. In addition, a participant's unique romantic desire for a partner positively predicted the partner's experience of unique chemistry with the participant, $r = .20$, $p < .001$, $p_{rep} > .985$. In stark contrast to these dyadic effects and to findings from nonromantic contexts, generalized reciprocity was negative, $r = -.41$, $p = .006$, $p_{rep} = .950$: If a participant generally tended to romantically desire others, those others tended not to desire him or her.[2] Furthermore, a participant's tendency to desire everyone negatively predicted partners' reports of chemistry with that participant, $r = -.32$, $p = .050$, $p_{rep} = .875$. None of these correlations differed by participants' sex, and similar conclusions were suggested by participants' yes/no decisions within a separate sample ($N = 608$, mean age = 40.1 years) who attended professional speed-dating events.

Why were the speed-daters who desired everyone so consistently disliked? One intriguing possibility emerged: The negative generalized-reciprocity correlation was partially mediated (Baron & Kenny, 1986) by perceived unselectivity, Sobel $z = 1.85$, $p = .065$, $p_{rep} = .858$. Compared with participants who experienced less desire for their speed-dates on average, those who experienced more desire were perceived as likely to say yes to a larger percentage of their speed-dates, which in turn negatively predicted their own desirability. This suggests that participants who desired everyone somehow broadcasted their unselectivity on their speed-dates, which ultimately proved costly.

[2]This negative effect of generalized romantic desire remained robust after controlling for participants' coder-rated physical attractiveness. Thus, the effect cannot be explained by objectively unattractive people liking everyone and being disliked.

DISCUSSION

These results suggest that romantic desire comes in two distinct "flavors" depending on whether it is exhibited uniquely toward a particular individual (with positive reciprocal effects) or toward individuals in general (with negative reciprocal effects). Indeed, the negative generalized-reciprocity correlation stands in contrast to findings from studies involving (a) nonromantic liking in initial encounters (Kenny, 1994) and (b) participants who do not actually interact (Walster et al., 1973, Study 6). Of course, we could not directly compare romantic and nonromantic liking in this study, and our mediational results, although suggestive, point to only one of several possible mechanisms (whether verbal or nonverbal) that could underlie the negative effect of generalized liking. Nevertheless, the emergence of these effects in a 4-min interaction governed by strong social-desirability concerns and conversational norms suggests that humans possess an impressive, highly attuned ability to assess such subtleties of romantic attraction. In fact, the need to feel special or unique could be a broad motivation that stretches across people's social lives. The importance of this need is certainly pronounced in established intimate relationships and friendships (Finkenauer, Engels, Branje, & Meeus, 2004; Kelley et al., 2003); the present study permits the additional conjecture that the need to feel special plays a central role even within the first few moments of a romantic encounter.

Acknowledgments—We thank Wendi L. Gardner, David A. Kenny, George Loewenstein, Jacob Matthews, and the Northwestern Speed-Dating Team. We also thank the Northwestern University Research Grants Committee, Kellogg's Dispute Resolution Research Center, and the National Science Foundation Graduate Research Fellowship Program for their financial support.

REFERENCES

Aron, A., Dutton, D.G., Aron, E.N., & Iverson, A. (1989). Experiences of falling in love. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*, *6*, 243–257.

Baron, R.M., & Kenny, D.A. (1986). The moderator-mediator variable distinction in social psychological research: Conceptual, strategic, and statistical considerations. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *51*, 1173–1182.

Chapdelaine, A., Kenny, D.A., & LaFontana, K.M. (1994). Matchmaker, matchmaker, can you make me a match? Predicting liking between two unacquainted persons. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *67*, 83–91.

Finkel, E.J., Eastwick, P.W., & Matthews, J. (2007). Speed-dating as an invaluable tool for studying romantic attraction: A methodological primer. *Personal Relationships*, *14*, 149–166.

Finkenauer, C., Engels, R.C.M.E., Branje, S.J.T., & Meeus, W. (2004). Disclosure and relationship satisfaction in families. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, *66*, 195–209.

Folkes, V.S., & Sears, D.O. (1977). Does everybody like a liker? *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, *13*, 505–519.

Kelley, H.H., Holmes, J.G., Kerr, N.L., Reis, H.T., Rusbult, C.E., & Van Lange, P.A. (2003). *An atlas of interpersonal situations*. Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press.

Kenny, D.A. (1994). *Interpersonal perception: A social relations analysis*. New York: Guilford.

Kenny, D.A., & Nasby, W. (1980). Splitting the reciprocity correlation. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *38*, 249–256.

Walster, E., Walster, G.W., Piliavin, J., & Schmidt, L. (1973). "Playing hard to get": Understanding an elusive phenomenon. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *26*, 113–121.

(RECEIVED 6/15/06; REVISION ACCEPTED 9/6/06;
FINAL MATERIALS RECEIVED 9/12/06)