

Running Head: UNSELECTIVE ROMANTIC DESIRE

Selective vs. Unselective Romantic Desire:

Not All Reciprocity is Created Equal

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It is well established in non-romantic 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. There is indeed evidence that, when asked to recall a falling-in-love experience, individuals often report learning of another'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 likely (for discussion, see Walster, Walster, Piliavin, & Schmidt, 1973).

One useful perspective on reciprocity derives from David Kenny's Social Relations Model (Kenny, 1994; Kenny & Nasby, 1980). This model distinguishes between two independent components: *Dyadic reciprocity*, which refers to liking that is shared uniquely between two individuals, and *generalized reciprocity*, which refers to the tendency for people who generally like others to be liked themselves. Although both dyadic and generalized reciprocity correlations tend to be positive in the literature on non-romantic interpersonal liking (Kenny, 1994), we hypothesized that romantic reciprocity would prove more nuanced. In a romantic setting, the dyadic reciprocity correlation should remain positive, but in contrast to non-romantic research, the generalized reciprocity correlation is likely to be negative. Although someone might indeed be likable if he/she were to demonstrate platonic liking for many others (Folkes & Sears, 1977), demonstrating romantic liking for many others could convey unselectivity and even desperation.

Therefore, expressing romantic desire may be *anti*-effective at inducing another's desire if it emerges as a generalized tendency rather than a unique response to a particular individual.

Method

To explore reciprocity dynamics in the opening minutes of potential romantic encounters, we employed *speed-dating*: a popular activity in which romantically available individuals meet and evaluate one another on brief "dates". We conducted 7 speed-dating sessions for 156¹ undergraduate students (75 female, $M_{age}=19.6$; see Finkel, Eastwick, & Matthews, 2006, for greater methodological detail). At the event, participants had 4-minute speed-dates with 9-13 opposite-sex individuals and completed a 2-minute *Interaction Record* immediately after each date. After returning home, participants recorded on a website whether they would ("yes") or would not ("no") be interested in meeting again each person they had speed-dated, and "matches" (mutual yesses) were given the ability to contact one another.

On each Interaction Record, participants completed (1=*strongly disagree*, 9=*strongly agree*) a 3-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 3-item measure of felt *chemistry* (e.g., "My interaction partner and I had a real connection"; $\alpha=.91$). Participants also completed a 1-item measure assessing the date's *perceived unselectivity* ("To what percentage of the other people here today will this person say 'yes'?").

Results

Results are presented in Table 1. Replicating findings from non-romantic contexts, dyadic reciprocity was positive, $r=.14$, $p=.001$, $p_{rep}=.986$: 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, $r=.20$, $p<.001$, $p_{\text{rep}}>.986$. In stark contrast to these dyadic effects and to findings from non-romantic contexts, generalized reciprocity was negative, $r=-.41$, $p=.006$, $p_{\text{rep}}=.962$: If a participant generally tended to romantically desire others, those others tended not to desire him/her.² Furthermore, the partners of participants who desired everyone reported less chemistry with them, $r=-.32$, $p=.050$, $p_{\text{rep}}=.878$. None of these correlations differed by participant sex, and similar conclusions were suggested by participants' yes/no decisions within a separate sample ($N=608$, $M_{\text{age}}=40$) 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 the *perceived unselectivity* item, Sobel $z=1.85$, $p=.065$, $p_{\text{rep}}=.858$. Participants who desired everyone were perceived as likely to say yes to a large percentage of their speed-dates, which in turn negatively predicted their desirability. This suggests that participants who desired everyone somehow broadcasted their unselectivity on their speed-dates, which ultimately proved costly.

Discussion

These results are the first to 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 correlation stands in contrast to studies involving (a) non-romantic 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 non-romantic liking in this study, and our mediational results, although suggestive, recommend only one of several possible mechanisms (whether verbal or nonverbal) that could underlie the negative generalized effect. Nevertheless, the emergence of these effects in a 4-minute 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 our social lives; just as this need plays an important role in intimate relationships and friendships (Kelley et al., 2003), the present study reveals a distinctive *anti*-reciprocity effect if this need is not satisfied in initial encounters with potential romantic partners.

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Footnotes

¹We randomly excluded seven participants because of software constraints.

²This negative generalized reciprocity effect remained robust after controlling for participants' coder-rated physical attractiveness, suggesting that it cannot be explained by objectively unattractive people liking everyone and being disliked.

Table 1

Correlations between Participants' Romantic Desire and Each Speed-Dating Partner's Romantic Desire (Reciprocity) and Chemistry

Romantic Desire Measure	Speed-dating Partner's Report	
	Romantic Desire	Chemistry
Dyadic	.14***	.20***
Generalized ^a	-.41**	-.32*

Note: The above correlations are calculated from each participant's *actor effect* (e.g., the average amount that Laura desired all her interaction partners), *partner effect* (e.g., the average amount that Laura was desired by all interaction partners), and *relationship effects* (e.g., the amount that Laura desired each particular partner independently of her actor effect and her partner's partner effect). For example, the correlation between the two romantic desire relationship effects (per dyad) across all dyads represents dyadic reciprocity, and the correlation between each participant's romantic desire actor and partner effect represents generalized reciprocity.

^aAs is convention, the generalized correlations are disattenuated.

* $p \leq .05$ ** $p \leq .01$. *** $p \leq .001$.