

Selectivity is ultimate aphrodisiac

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Speed daters who romantically desired most of their potential partners were rejected quickly and overwhelmingly, according to a new Northwestern University study.

Conventional wisdom has long taught that one of the best ways to get someone to like you is to make it clear that you like them. Now researchers have discovered that this law of reciprocity is in dire need of an asterisk in the domain of romantic attraction.

The more you tend to experience romantic desire for all the potential romantic partners you meet, the study shows, the less likely it is that they will desire you in return. (Think too desperate, too indiscriminate.)

In contrast, when you desire a potential partner above and beyond your other options, only then is your desire likely to be reciprocated. (Think hallelujah, finally, someone really gets me.)

In the past, social psychologists have had a difficult time observing initial romantic attraction in action, but the speed-dating methodology used in this study allowed the investigators to take a serious look at the chemistry that has been at the center of so much literature, art and imagination throughout the ages.

"Potential partners who seem indiscriminating are a definite turnoff, and those who evoke the magic of feeling special are a big draw," said Paul W. Eastwick, the lead author of the study and a Northwestern graduate student in psychology. "The wild part is that our speed-daters

were negotiating all of these subtleties with only four minutes for each date."

"Selective vs. Unselective Romantic Desire: Not All Reciprocity is Created Equal," by Eastwick and Northwestern's Eli J. Finkel, assistant professor of psychology, will be published in the April issue of the journal *Psychological Science*. Also contributing to the report are Daniel Mochon and Dan Ariely of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

"How this all happens is a bit of a mystery," Finkel said. "Put yourself in the position of a speed dater. You're not only able to pick up something about the degree to which that person likes you, but you're able to pick up -- in four minutes -- the degree to which that person likes you more than their other dates. It's amazing."

To explore dynamics in the opening minutes of romantic attraction, the researchers set up seven speed-dating sessions for a total of 156 undergraduate students. Participants had four-minute speed dates with nine to 13 opposite-sex individuals. Immediately following each date, they completed a two-minute questionnaire, answering items such as "I really liked my interaction partner" and "I was sexually attracted to my interaction partner."

After returning home, they recorded on the study Web site whether they would be interested in meeting each person they had speed-dated again in the future. Mutual "yeses" were given the ability to contact one another.

"People who like everyone, unlike in a friendship context where they generally are liked in return, may exude desperation in a romantic context," Finkel said.

"It suggests to us that romantic desire comes in two distinct flavors:

selective and unselective," Eastwick added. "If your goal is to get someone to notice you, the unselective flavor is going to fail, and fast."

The need to feel special or unique could be a broad motivation that stretches across our social lives, the study concludes. "Just as this need plays an important role in intimate relationships and friendships, the present study reveals a distinctive anti-reciprocity effect if this need is not satisfied in initial encounters with potential romantic partners."

Source: Northwestern University

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