Medical Xpress

A sense of scarcity: Why it seems like all the good ones are taken

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Singles' bars, classified personals and dating websites are a reflection, not only of the common human desire to find a mate, but of the sense of scarcity that seems to surround the hunt. Many people participate in dating activities in the hopes of finding that special someone, yet feel as though it is an impossible task. However, thanks to an international team of psychologists, the solution may be closer than we think—within ourselves, to be exact.

Xianchi Dai, Klaus Wertenbroch and Miguel Brendl from INSEAD, the international business school with campuses in France and Singapore, have been studying what they call the "value heuristic." A heuristic is a sort of cognitive short cut or "rule of thumb" that we use when we are unable to make a truly informed decision. The psychologists' research suggests that many mate-seekers are unwittingly subbing something clear and simple—their yearning for a potential mate—for a complicated and unknowable statistic (i.e., how many of the relationship-worthy bachelors and bachelorettes are still available).

The connection between scarcity and value is something we all know; for example, gold is considered precious because it is rare, not because it makes for a poor construction material. The psychologists' research suggests that this link has become deep-wired into our neurons, so that even its inverse is unconsciously called upon for life decisions—what's valuable must be scarce.

To test their value heuristic theory, the researchers had a group of young

people view nearly one hundred pictures, half of birds and half of flowers, in random order. They then told participants that they would get paid a few cents either for each bird picture or for each flower picture they had seen. To determine whether a participant would be paid for bird or for flower pictures, the researchers let each participant flip a coin. Before being paid accordingly, all participants were asked to estimate the total number of bird pictures and the total number of flower pictures they had seen.

The results were unambiguous. As described in the January issue of Psychological Science, a journal of the Association for Psychological Science, people who were paid for spotting flower pictures thought there were fewer flowers than birds, and likewise, those who were made to value birds determined they were scarcer than flowers. Nobody knew that in fact there were exactly the same number of flowers and birds.

So in effect, their experimentally-induced yearning caused them to wrongly perceive scarcity.

To increase the validity of their findings, the scientists ran several other experiments. In one, participants of both sexes viewed portraits of men and women, some attractive and some not.

When questioned later, both men and women believed that there were fewer attractive people of the opposite sex than there were of the same sex.

If the portraits were unattractive, they tended not to perceive a sense of scarcity. As in the first experiment, the participants appeared to be substituting their emotional desire for calculation, and ended up believing that what they wanted was less likely to be found.

The results, therefore, suggest that people rely on some deeply ingrained judgmental heuristics when estimating frequencies and probabilities in everyday life, heuristics that can sometimes go astray, for example, when implying a more solitary life than might be warranted by reality.

Source: Association for Psychological Science