

Being altruistic may make you attractive

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(PhysOrg.com) -- Displays of altruism or selflessness towards others can be sexually attractive in a mate. This is one of the findings of a study carried out by biologists and a psychologist at The University of Nottingham.

In three studies of more than 1,000 people Dr Tim Phillips and his fellow researchers discovered that women place significantly greater importance on altruistic traits than anything else. Their findings have been published in the *British Journal of Psychology*.

Dr Phillips said: "Evolutionary theory predicts competition between individuals and yet we see many examples in nature of individuals disadvantaging themselves to help others. In humans, particularly, we see individuals prepared to put themselves at considerable risk to help individuals they do not know for no obvious reward."

Participants in the studies were questioned about a range of qualities they look for in a mate, including examples of altruistic behaviour such as 'donates blood regularly' and 'volunteered to help out in a local hospital'. Women placed significantly greater importance on altruistic traits in all three studies.

Yet both sexes may consider altruistic traits when choosing a partner. One hundred and seventy couples were asked to rate how much they preferred altruistic traits in a mate and report their own level of altruistic behaviour. The strength of preference in one partner was found to correlate with the extent of altruistic behaviour typically displayed in the

other, suggesting that altruistic traits may well be a factor both men and women take into account when choosing a partner.

Dr Phillips said: "For many years the standard explanation for altruistic behaviour towards non-relatives has been based on reciprocity and reputation — a version of 'you scratch my back and I'll scratch yours'. I believe we need to look elsewhere to understand the roots of human altruism. The expansion of the human brain would have greatly increased the cost of raising children so it would have been important for our ancestors to choose mates both willing and able to be good, long-term parents. Displays of altruism could well have provided accurate clues to this and genes linked to altruism would have been favoured as a result."

Dr Phillips concluded: "Sexual selection could well come to be seen as exerting a major influence on what made humans human."

Dr Tom Reader in the School of Biology said: "Sexual preferences have enormous potential to shape the evolution of animal behaviour. Humans are clearly not an exception: sex may have a crucial role in explaining what are our most biologically interesting and unusual habits."

Provided by University of Nottingham

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