

Quantity may determine quality when choosing romantic partners

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The context in which humans meet potential mates has a hidden influence on who they decide to pursue. In particular, when people have a large number of potential dating partners to select among, they respond by paying attention to different types of characteristics - discarding attributes such as education, smoking status, and occupation in favor of physical characteristics such as height and weight.

A number of studies in recent years have looked at what happens to humans when faced with extensive choice - too many kinds of chocolate, or too many detergents to choose from at the grocery store. Under such circumstances, consumer psychologists believe that the brain may become "overwhelmed," potentially leading to poorer quality choice or choice deferral. Psychological scientist Alison Lenton, of the University of Edinburgh, and economist Marco Francesconi, of the University of Essex, wanted to know if the same was true of mate choice, given that humans have been practicing this particular choice for millennia. "Is having too many mate options really like having too many jams?" they ask. The study is published in *Psychological Science*, a journal of the Association for [Psychological Science](#).

To find out how people respond to relatively limited versus extensive [mate choice](#), Lenton and Francesconi analyzed data from 84 speed dating events, which is where people meet with a series of potential dates for three minutes each. Afterward, the men and women report their choices (a "yes" or "no" for each person). It should surprise no one that choosers generally preferred people who were taller, younger, and well-

educated. Women also preferred partners who weren't too skinny, and men preferred women who weren't overweight. Beyond that, though, the attributes that speed daters paid attention to depended on how many opposite-sex speed daters attended the event.

At bigger speed dating events, with 24 or more dates, both male and female choosers were more likely to decide based on attributes that could be judged quickly, such as their dates' height, and whether they were underweight, normal weight, or overweight. At smaller events, choosers were more likely to make decisions based on attributes that take longer to identify and evaluate, such as their dates' level of education, their type of job, and whether or not the person smokes.

"Obviously, I think we look for different attributes in partners than what we look for in a chocolate, a jam or a 401(k) plan," says Lenton. "But one of the points we're trying to make in this article is it's the same brain we're carrying around. There are constraints on what our brains can do - they're quite powerful, but they can't pay attention to everything at once." And if the brain is faced with abundant choice, even about who to go out with, it may make decisions based on what it can evaluate most quickly. As a result, this previously invisible aspect of the choice environment has the potential to determine one's romantic fate.

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