

In romantic relationships, people do indeed have a 'type'

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If you've ever come out of a bad relationship and decided you need to date someone different from your usual "type," you're not alone.

However, new research by social psychologists at the University of Toronto (U of T) suggests that might be easier said than done. A study published today in *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* shows people often look for love with the same type of person over and over again.

"It's common that when a relationship ends, people attribute the breakup to their ex-partner's [personality](#) and decide they need to date a different type of person," says lead author Yoobin Park, a Ph.D. student in the Department of Psychology in the Faculty of Arts & Science at U of T. "Our research suggests there's a strong tendency to nevertheless continue to date a similar personality."

Using data from an ongoing multi-year study on couples and families across several age groups, Park and co-author Geoff MacDonald, a professor in the Department of Psychology at U of T, compared the personalities of current and past partners of 332 people. Their primary finding was the existence of a significant consistency in the personalities of an individual's [romantic partners](#).

"The effect is more than just a tendency to date someone similar to yourself," says Park.

Participants in the study along with a sample of current and past partners, assessed their own personality traits related to agreeableness, conscientiousness, extraversion, neuroticism, and openness to experience. They were polled on how much they identified with a series of statements such as, "I am usually modest and reserved", "I am interested in many different kinds of things" and "I make plans and carry them out". Respondents were asked to rate their disagreement or agreement with each statement on a five-point scale.

Park and MacDonald's analysis of the responses showed that overall, the

current partners of individuals described themselves in ways that were similar to past partners.

"The degree of consistency from one relationship to the next suggests that people may indeed have a 'type'," says MacDonald. "And though our data do not make clear why people's partners exhibit similar personalities, it is noteworthy that we found partner similarity above and beyond similarity to oneself."

By examining first-person testimonials of someone's partners rather than relying on someone's own description of them, the work accounts for biases found in other studies.

"Our study was particularly rigorous because we didn't just rely on one person recalling their various partners' personalities," said Park. "We had reports from the partners themselves in real time."

The researchers say the findings offer ways to keep relationships healthy and couples happy.

"In every relationship, people learn strategies for working with their partner's personality," says Park. "If your new partner's personality resembles your ex-partner's personality, transferring the skills you learned might be an effective way to start a new relationship on a good footing."

On the other hand, Park says the strategies people learn to manage their partner's personality can also be negative, and that more research is needed to determine how much meeting someone similar to an ex-partner is a plus, and how much it's a minus when moving to a new relationship.

"So, if you find you're having the same issues in relationship after

[relationship](#)," says Park, "you may want to think about how gravitating toward the same personality traits in a partner is contributing to the consistency in your problems."

The data for the research comes from the German Family Panel study launched in 2008, an ongoing longitudinal study on couple and family dynamics with a nationally representative sample of adolescents, young adults, and midlife individuals in Germany.

More information: Yoobin Park et al., "Consistency between individuals' past and current romantic partners' own reports of their personalities," *PNAS* (2019).

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