

Reprinted from JOURNAL OF EXPERIMENTAL SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGY, Volume 6, Number 2,
April 1970

Copyright © 1970 by Academic Press, Inc. *Printed in U. S. A.*

The Effect of Self-Esteem on Liking for Dates of Various Social Desirabilities¹

ELAINE WALSTER

University of Wisconsin

It has often been proposed that individuals come to prefer romantic partners whose social assets approximate their own. Data in this area are inconclusive. Two experiments testing this hypothesis are reported: In these experiments self-esteem was both measured and manipulated. Then individuals were exposed to dates varying markedly in social desirability and asked to indicate their liking for these dates. Regardless of whether stable or manipulated self-esteem was examined, no support for the matching hypothesis was secured. Subjects at the highest and the lowest self-esteem levels preferred the most socially desirable dates to the same extent.

There is much disagreement about whether or not an individual's preferences in dates are influenced by his self-esteem. Goffman (1952) observed that a man does not make advances to the most desirable woman in existence, but to a woman whose social assets do not too far exceed his own. Level of aspiration theory makes a similar prediction (see Lewin, Deubo, Festinger, & Sears, 1944). Walster, Aronson, Abrahams, and Rottman (1966) tested the matching hypothesis in a field experiment. The authors argued that an individual can estimate his own social desirability (SD) and the SDs of potential dates (Os) with some accuracy. They argued that since an individual is more likely to be rewarded if he approaches Os whose SDs are not too far in excess of his own, he should come to prefer romantic partners with similar SDs.

The authors' hypotheses were not supported. Individuals did not prefer partners with appropriate SDs. The essential findings of the Walster *et al.* study were supported in a subsequent study by Brislin and Lewis (1968). Survey data also suggest that the matching hypothesis might be invalid. Burgess, Wallin, and Schultz (1953) observe that dating is unsatisfactory

¹For a detailed report of this research and supplementary material order NAPS Document No. 00638 from ASIS National Auxiliary Publications Service, c/o CCM Information Sciences, Inc., 22 West 34th Street, New York, New York 10001, remitting \$1.00 for microfiche or \$3.00 for photocopies.

This research was supported in part by National Science Foundation Grant GS-1897 and in part by National Institute of Mental Health Grant MH-16661.

for everyone except the most attractive men and women. A matching system, which would promote a relatively equitable distribution of romantic partners throughout the various SD levels, does not seem to operate.

Only one study has been successful in demonstrating that one's own self-esteem affects his romantic choices. In an unpublished study, Kiesler and Baral² raised or lowered self-esteem of college males and then gave them an opportunity to interact with an attractive or a dowdy female confederate. High self-esteem males tended to prefer the attractive confederate, while low self-esteem males tended to prefer the unattractive one. Unfortunately, these results only occurred when the junior author was the confederate. Kiesler is currently conducting a follow-up study.

The preceding confusing pattern of results led the author to conduct two controlled laboratory experiments to test the matching hypothesis.

PROCEDURE

In Experiment I, subjects were 85 randomly selected men and women from a California college. In Experiment II, subjects were 34 men from a midwestern university.³

Stable Self-Esteem Measures

Subjects were given a battery of personality tests at the Student Counseling Center. Included in the battery were three measures of stable self-esteem. (1) The Janis and Field Personality Questionnaire (Feelings of inadequacy subsection), described in Hovland and Janis (1959). (2) Self-esteem items from the California Personality Inventory, described in Walster (1965). (3) Self-Ratings of Social Desirability. Subjects rated their own social poise, intelligence, physical attractiveness, popularity with the opposite sex, prestige, athletic ability, and likability.

Experimental Session

Subjects ranked photographs of 15 Os on physical attractiveness. On the basis of the subject's ratings, the experimenter prepared two booklets for each subject. Each booklet contained pictures, brief autobiographies, and presumably objective SD ratings for five Os. The Os depicted in each booklet were Extremely Desirable, Fairly Desirable, Average in social desirability, Fairly Undesirable, and Extremely Undesirable. (The

² Kiesler, Sara B., and Baral, Roberta L., The search for a romantic partner: The effects of self-esteem and physical attractiveness on romantic behavior (1966). (Available in Mimeo.)

³ Thanks are due Dr. Burton Danet, a clinician at the University of Minnesota, for conducting Experiment II.

subject believed that the Os depicted in the first booklet would soon be entering his college.) After reading the booklet, the subjects were asked how much they liked each O romantically.

Then subjects took a coffee break. Subjects who wished to do so (and all did) picked up the psychiatrist's analysis of their personality reports at the Counseling Center. The reports handed out by the Center were bogus reports and constituted the manipulation of the independent variable. One third of the subjects were randomly assigned to receive a report which would raise their self-esteem and one third to receive a report which would lower it. Control subjects received no report. These reports were previously successful in manipulating college students' self-esteem (see Walster, 1965). The experimenter, of course, did not know to which condition the subjects had been assigned.

When the subjects returned, they were given the second booklet, which contained the pictures, autobiographies, and the SD ratings of five Os who would be attending subsequent get-acquainted parties with the subjects. Subjects were asked how much they liked each O romantically. These ratings constituted the dependent variable. Then the subjects evaluated the SDs of the five Os and their own SD. In addition, subjects were told that after they had gotten acquainted with the five Os they would be asked how interested they were in dating one another. Subjects were asked to guess how each O would rate them. (These ratings served as manipulation checks.)

Finally, subjects were debriefed.

RESULTS¹

It was hypothesized that individuals prefer romantic partners of approximately their own social desirability. Thus, whether we considered stable self-esteem or manipulated self-esteem, we expected the matching hypothesis to be confirmed. The failure to confirm this hypothesis in any way is striking.

Stable Self-Esteem

If individuals prefer partners of approximately their own SD, high self-esteem individuals should like extremely desirable Os better than medium or low self-esteem individuals do. Individuals with medium self-esteem should like Os of average SD better than others do, and low self-esteem individuals should like undesirable Os better than others do. Three measures of stable self-esteem were available: The Janis and Field measure, the Self-Ratings of SD, and the California Personality Inven-

¹Thanks are due Dr. Ellen Berscheid and Marshall Demner, University of Minnesota, for their help in analyzing the data.

tory. When we examine the effect of the subjects' stable self-esteem on subjects' liking for the various Os depicted in Booklet 1 (See Table 1), it is evident that the matching hypothesis is not supported. Thirty significance tests were conducted. (Three self-esteem measures \times two experiments \times five different Os rated = 30 *F* tests.) All of the significance tests are nonsignificant.

Manipulated Self-Esteem

The evidence indicates that the manipulation of self-esteem was totally successful and that subjects did perceive the SD of the various Os as we assumed they would.

TABLE 1

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN STABLE SELF-ESTEEM AND LIKING FOR VARIOUS DATES

Measure of self-esteem	Social desirability of Os				
	Extremely desirable	Fairly desirable	Average	Fairly undesirable	Extremely undesirable
<i>Janis-Field</i>					
Experiment I					
High	14.1	12.6	11.3	9.3	7.5
Medium	14.7	13.3	11.3	10.0	7.9
Low	14.7	12.4	12.2	9.3	8.2
Experiment II					
High	15.5	12.7	13.7	6.8	8.6
Medium	13.8	13.6	14.3	8.1	6.3
Low	12.8	13.0	13.4	8.5	7.7
<i>Self Ratings of SD</i>					
Experiment I					
High	15.0	12.7	11.5	9.6	8.1
Medium	14.5	12.8	11.6	9.3	7.2
Low	14.0	13.1	11.6	9.8	8.1
Experiment II					
High	14.2	13.1	14.1	7.4	6.9
Medium	13.2	13.7	13.8	7.8	5.9
Low	13.4	13.1	13.7	9.0	8.2
<i>C. P. I.</i>					
Experiment I					
High	14.3	13.0	11.7	9.8	8.2
Medium	14.2	12.5	11.8	9.5	7.6
Low	15.2	13.2	11.0	9.5	7.9
Experiment II					
High	14.4	14.0	14.2	9.3	9.0
Medium	14.3	12.5	13.9	7.8	7.2
Low	12.7	13.9	13.8	8.0	6.6

^a All between-cell differences are n.s.

It was predicted that when subjects' self-esteem was raised, they would increase their liking for the more attractive Os and decrease their liking for the less attractive Os. When subjects' self-esteem was lowered, they would decrease their liking for the most attractive Os and increase their liking for less attractive Os.

A specific contrast is available to test our hypothesis (see Hays, 1963), i.e., we expect the slope of the changes in liking for Os to be altered in a linear way by variations in the independent variable. The predicted interaction F is nonsignificant in both experiments. (In Experiment I, $F = 1.85$, 1 and 82 df , $p > .17$; In Experiment II, $F = 3.59$, 1 and 31 df , $p > .07$.) More importantly, it is apparent from Table 2 that the pattern of the mean changes in liking for the Os are not consistent with our predictions.

After conducting Experiment I, it was possible to convince ourselves that in spite of the fact that no significant differences were secured, there were some weak trends in the predicted direction, and that these "true" trends would emerge if only a few design weaknesses were remedied. Numerous small changes were made in the design of Experiment II. These changes involved such things as hiring a therapist to be present during the time the subjects filled out their questionnaires, simplifying the instructions, and rewording some of the questions. None of these changes altered in any way the outcome of Experiment II. The consistency of our failure to secure predicted results, in spite of unusual experimental efforts, has succeeded in convincing us that the matching

TABLE 2
THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN MANIPULATED SELF-ESTEEM AND CHANGES IN LIKING FOR VARIOUS DATES

Self-esteem	Social desirability of Os				
	Extremely desirable	Fairly desirable	Average	Fairly undesirable	Extremely undesirable
Experiment I ^a					
Raised	+ .80	+ .26	- .09	+ .20	- .37
Unchanged	+ .78	+1.21	- .47	+ .06	+ .42
Lowered	+ .86	+ .23	+ .59	+ .73	+ .89
Experiment II ^b					
Raised	+1.03	+ .05	+ .69	+ .18	+2.17
Unchanged	+ .05	+ .98	+ .16	+1.92	- .03
Lowered	- .02	-2.45	- .45	- .31	- .32

^a Predicted interaction $F = 1.85$, 1 and 82 df , $p < .17$.

^b Predicted interaction $F = 3.59$, 1 and 31 df , $p < .07$.

hypothesis, which seemed so plausible, is not an important determinant of romantic preferences.

REFERENCES

- BRISLIN, R. W., & LEWIS, S. A. Dating and physical attractiveness: A replication. *Psychological Reports*, 1968, **22**, 976.
- BURGESS, E. W., WALLIN, P., & SCHULTZ, GLADYS DENNY. *Courtship, engagement and marriage*. Philadelphia, Pa.: Lippincott, 1953.
- GOFFMAN, E. On cooling the mark out: Some aspects of adaptation to failure. *Psychiatry*, 1952, **15**, 451-463.
- HAYS, W. L. *Statistics for psychologists*. New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1963.
- HOVLAND, C. I., & JANIS, I. I. *Personality and persuasibility*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1959. Pp. 300-301.
- LEWIN, K., DEMBO, TEMARA, FESTINGER, L., & SEARS, P. Level of aspiration. In J. McV. Hunt (Ed.), *Personality and the behavior disorders*, Vol. 1. New York: Ronald Press, 1944. Pp. 333-378.
- WALSTER, ELAINE. The effect of self-esteem on romantic liking. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, 1965, **1**, 184-197.
- WALSTER, ELAINE, ARONSON, VERA, ABRAHAMIS, DARCY, & ROTTMAN, L. Importance of physical attractiveness in dating behavior. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 1966, **4**, 508-516.

(Received December 12, 1968)