

Love's Labor's Found: Psychological Science and the Quest for Romance

February 01, 2007

February is a time for searching. At the beginning of the month, a bewhiskered Punxsutawney native searches for his shadow. At month's end, most years, Leap Day babies search in vain for their presents. Every fourth year, the Earth searches for a missing day.

Smack in the middle is the Sisyphean search for the perfect — or at least passable — Valentine's Day. To many people, that means looking for restaurant reservations or hunting through Hallmark cards. To some it means the search for a soul mate. To others, a simple date. To still others, antidepressants.

A collection of recent behavioral research offers a heart-shaped compass to those trekking across love's dark terrain. The journey begins with evidence that could help guide the couple in search of a stronger relationship.

For decades, researchers have studied how one member of a couple responds to a partner's negative experience — say, getting fired or having a car accident. Many psychologists who have studied these social support responses have found that healthy couples carry one another through hard times.

Others researchers, however, have found somewhat surprisingly that social support often undermines the very relationship it tries to strengthen. Work by APS Fellow Sandra Murray, University of Buffalo, SUNY, some of which appeared in the April 2005 *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, suggests that going to someone — even a loved one — with a problem is an admission of inadequacy that can damage a person's sense of self-worth.

Such evidence points to a Catch-22 of social support, says Shelly Gable, UC Santa Barbara. “What you think your partner thinks of you is important,” she says. “If you're going to your partner for support, you're putting that on the line.” To study how couples can avoid this relationship conundrum, Gable and her colleagues examined an aspect of relationships that has received scant empirical examination: the support someone gives after a partner has a positive experience — also called “capitalization.”

Gable's team videotaped interactions between 79 dating couples. Each partner took turns disclosing a recent positive event, such as scoring high on an exam or being accepted into graduate school, and a negative event, such as having financial difficulties or disliking a job. Afterwards, disclosers took turns rating how sympathetic their partner had been. Independently, researchers watched the interactions and rated each person's social support and capitalization. Gable's team also had each partner rate his or her overall satisfaction with the relationship before the videotaped sessions and again two months later.

Somewhat to Gable's surprise, she says, capitalization, and not social support, consistently predicted the strength of a relationship — both at the time of the study and eight weeks later — the team concludes in the November 2006 *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*. Though an extreme negative event,

such as the death of a friend, could alter a relationship, says Gable, when it comes to middle-of-the-road experiences, acknowledging the good times might mean more to couples than coping with the bad.

“The way partners respond when positive events are shared really contributes to the overall health of the relationship,” she says. “The biggest message is that these opportunities to strengthen the relationship, these positive sharing opportunities, shouldn’t be ignored.”

About Face

For people in search of that understanding partner, the path to Valentine’s Day bliss starts skin deep. New research offers evidence that women find certain types of male faces attractive depending on what kind of companion they want. Some faces say love at first sight, some say lust, and some say no way.

Previous research on male facial attractiveness has been contradictory, says Daniel Kruger, University of Michigan, author of the new research published in the December 2006 *Personal Relationships*. Some studies have found that women prefer traditionally masculine features, such as prominent brows and large jaws; others have shown that women prefer softer male faces.

Coming from an evolutionary perspective, Kruger saw this difference not as a conflict of interest, but as a conflict of purpose. Perhaps, thought Kruger, a woman’s facial preference changes based on whether she is looking for a short- or long-term relationship.

Traditional evolutionary theory suggests that, in species with lengthy female gestation and investment in parenting, mating competition among males is great, says Steve Gangestad, University of New Mexico. A male’s attractiveness enhances his ability to secure a mate, and having more mates increases the chances that his genes will survive — and grow stronger — over time. It benefits these successful males, who tend to have higher testosterone levels and more masculine facial features, to spend less time parenting. Less physically attractive males can, by providing food and support, endear themselves to the opposite sex, and therefore have a chance at reproduction.

Most of this theory is based on nonhuman animals. But indeed, some studies have linked so-called masculine features to higher testosterone levels. Recent work also has shown that women prefer more masculine-looking mates during the fertile phases of their ovulatory cycles.

“[Women] can get a more competitive guy, who had better genes, for their offspring, but they’ll trade off some parenting,” explains Gangestad, who wrote about the mating trade-off hypothesis with APS Fellow Jeffrey Simpson, University of Minnesota, in *Behavioral and Brain Sciences* in 2000. “I don’t think there’s conscious thinking about how good this guy’s genes are for my offspring. Rather, there’s simply the argument that humans shaped over time as if they cared about genes.”

This line of thinking led Kruger to predict that women would prefer men with masculine facial characteristics for short-term relationships and men with feminine facial characteristics for long-term relationships. To study this prediction, Kruger showed images of typical male faces to hundreds of male and female participants. Using computer enhancement, he emphasized the brow, jaw, and cheekbones of some faces and de-emphasized them in others.

Participants significantly associated the more feminine faces with men who would be good husbands, be

caring and emotional, be great with children, spend money to provide for the family, and work hard at a disliked work, among other things, Kruger reports in the December 2006 *Personal Relationships*. Participants significantly associated the more masculine faces with men who are physical, philandering, and attractive options for a one-night stand.

In a separate study, female participants significantly preferred the more masculine faces as a partner for an affair, and chose more feminine-faced males as the kind their parents would want them to date. Surprisingly, says Kruger, these tendencies achieved significance from the facial image alone; no personality traits or character descriptions accompanied the pictures.

“It’s remarkable that people will infer complex behavioral patterns from a small, grainy image of a man’s face on a computer screen,” Kruger says. “The fact that people were able to make these judgments suggests how strong our abilities to make these inferences are.”

Rules of Attraction

After settling on a long- or short-term mate, the next stop on the road to a successful Valentine’s Day is winning that person’s affection. One strategy in that pursuit, new research suggests, is to overestimate the attractiveness of members of the same sex.

A study by Sarah Hill, University of Texas, builds off the Error Management Theory, presented in a 2000 paper by Martie Haselton and David Buss, who was Hill’s advisor. (Hill performed the research as a graduate student but had defended her dissertation by the time we spoke.) The theory argues that natural selection has tilted our decisions in favor of less costly errors over the course of history.

Say, for example, you’re dining with your wife when a strange man approaches the table. The worst-case ending to this scenario is for the lady to leave with the other man (unpaid check notwithstanding). But if you assume that the stranger is more attractive than he really is — that is, more attractive than your wife actually finds him — you can guard against such infidelity.

“If you underestimate, you won’t put forth enough effort to acquire a mate in the first place,” says Hill. “And once you do, if you assume everyone isn’t as good as you are, you can find yourself in a lot of trouble.”

In her study, which appears in an upcoming issue of *Evolution and Human Behavior*, Hill showed 20 photographs of men and women to more than 200 heterosexual male and female subjects. For each photograph, participants answered five questions about the person’s desirability as a mate and three unrelated questions.

On average across the five desirability questions, male subjects rated men in the photographs as about a five on a scale of 10. Female subjects rated the same men as a 3.75. Conversely, female subjects rated women in the photographs as a 6.4 in desirability; males rated these same women as roughly 5.2.

Both these comparisons are statistically significant, Hill reports. By contrast, no significant correlations between gender and rating existed for the nonmating questions. Overall, females were judged as more desirable — a consequence of the participant pool being college age, Hill suspects.

Hill points out that men overestimated potential competitors more than women did, perhaps as a result of different reproductive consequences. If a woman puts forth mating effort and succeeds, she need not compete for at least nine months, whereas men can compete continually.

When asked why evolutionary competition continues to influence behavior, despite the clear security of humans as a species, Hill explains that a common misunderstanding of evolutionary theory is that behaviors are for the benefit of the species over the individual. “Individuals who put forth great mating effort will get [genes] passed on to the next generation,” she says. “The result is that all of us have that drive, because those who had it were our ancestors, and those who didn’t, aren’t.”

Blissful Solitude

Sometimes, in that metaphorical chocolate box that is February, the search for a delightful caramel truffle comes up empty (or, worse, turns out to be orange crème). Fear not, says Bella DePaulo, currently a visiting professor at UC Santa Barbara. An enjoyable Valentine’s Day can be achieved at a table for one.

DePaulo’s recent work on single people, which appeared in the October 2006 *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, and her new book, **Singled Out**, seem part empirical science, part autobiography. Throughout her life, the 53-year-old lifetime single says, people confused her solitude for misery. When she began noticing newspaper headlines, and even books, that stigmatized single people, she searched the psychological literature for evidence supporting the idea that being single means being unhappy.

When she found none, she decided to focus her research on discrimination against single people — or, as she calls it, “singlism.”

“We are, as a nation, and also as a science, very sensitive to all sorts of ‘isms,’ and yet singlism has slipped under the radar,” she says. “Even science and people in the intellectual vanguard have bought into this idea that if only you find ‘The One’ and get married, that’s going to transform your life.”

In one study, DePaulo and her colleagues asked some 1,000 undergraduate subjects what came to mind when they thought about married people and when they thought about single people. Married people received accolades such as mature, stable, and happy; single people were labeled insecure, self-centered, and lonely. The characteristics of being caring, kind, and giving were assigned to married people 50 percent of the time, compared with a mere 2 percent for single people.

To be slandered by a college student is one thing. But further research confirmed DePaulo’s hypothesis that singlism has more serious consequences. Single people receive less work compensation than married people do, even adjusting for age and experience, she says. Employers often subsidize health care for spouses without extending a comparable benefit to a single person’s close friend or family member. In one study, DePaulo described potential tenants to a subject pool of rental agents. The agents preferred married couples 60 percent of the time.

DePaulo acknowledges that other “isms” — namely, racism and sexism — are more severe. “Yet when you look at the whole picture,” she says, “I think it really deserves to be taken seriously.”

Studies of happiness suggest that this negative perception of singlism is undeserved. To investigate

whether people become happier when they marry, Richard Lucas, Michigan State University, followed thousands of German subjects for 18 years.

Participants who married reported slightly more happiness the year of their wedding but returned to previous levels thereafter. This honeymoon effect, however slight, applies only to people who stayed married; those who eventually divorced were already becoming less happy when they tied the knot.

“Regardless of how happy you are once you get married, that doesn’t transform you into a happier person,” says DePaulo, who, it seems worthy to note, has plans for studies of deception. “There’s this huge discrepancy between what we think about married and single people, and what’s really true.”

The bad news, says DePaulo, is that cultural ideology has yet to correct the stigma of being single. The good news is that singles searching for a happy Valentine’s Day can enjoy the holiday the way it was originally conceived: “As a way of appreciating all the people important to us,” she says, “and not just one particular person.”