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On Ideals in Romantic Relationships

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Being in relationships is inseparable from being human. Humans are communicators and naturally form connections with other humans around them. Relationships help individuals assess who they are and who they would like to be. Individuals use relationships to satisfy emotional, physical, and instrumental needs. Some of these needs are best met by romantic relationships between two individuals. Romantic relationships, which many people often expect to partake in throughout their lives, are intimately affected by standards, assumptions, and ideals. Though some deny it, everyone has standards for the person with whom they could potentially be romantically involved. This study will focus on these standards, a relatively neglected area of interpersonal communication research.

The lack of adequate research makes it difficult to access the standards people have, the reasons they engage with the people they do, and the reasons for creating the standards they have for their partner. Generally researchers have assumed romantic relationships to be guided by certain norms, rules and standards. However, research has not specifically addressed these rules but instead focuses on the violations individuals make in their romantic relationships (West, 2006). A robust study of the relational standards is essential for a complete view of romantic relationships.

Researching relationship standards is important also because romantic relationships surround people in everyday life. Although not everyone is in a romantic relationship, many are impacted by romantic relationships to create standards in their mind for who they will date. With the increase of media exposure in recent years, many teenagers and adults turn to the media for relationship standards. Holmes and Johnson (2009) stated 90% of younger people find information about love in movies, 94% in television and only 33% from their own mothers. They continued their point by supporting their research with cultivation theory in which individuals who expose themselves to what is defined on the television over a long period of time will eventually develop perceptions consistent to what is portrayed on television. Romantic relationships are shown through many different media and when people create their standards based off what they view, many times it is a false representation of reality. Researching relationship standards adds to our knowledge of influential surroundings and what contributes to the formation of relationship standards.

Finally, studying the relational standards people create is important to determine why the standards are created and how strictly they are followed. Those who are facing the dating world may have costs and rewards in terms of their standards. Understanding relationship expectations helps determine whether individuals have a relationship correlating with their standards, or if they must settle for someone below their standards, and what may happen to the relationship when anticipated standards are not met.

This study provides noteworthy research by contributing to an effective understanding of why people choose to be with their significant other. Social exchange theory states that individuals share resources with one another to facilitate our own needs. We share things such as love, knowledge, and other information. This assists in developing closeness within a relationship of any kind. Relating social exchange theory, relationship standards, and comparison levels will surely provide insight into the romantic relationship that we carry on in life. If individuals learn how to balance the standards they already have with the people they date it may prove to be beneficial to the overall health of the relationship.

The juxtaposition of a person's ideal list of traits that he or she seeks in a spouse and the actual characteristics of current romantic interests illuminates the way that a person's self-perception. In the case that a person's comparison level is consistent with their history of dating, this research would provide little value, besides indicating that people want what they think they want. If, however, a person's comparison level is different from their history of dating, then it would be important to understand why this occurs, to what degree, and in what areas. It is possible that people do not realize the traits that attract them to another person until that person is interacting with them.

Because this segment represents a relatively unknown territory in the study of romantic relationships, the research at hand was created to assess the following hypotheses:

H_1: A significant difference exists between an individual's ideals and his or her actual choice of significant other.

H_2: A significant difference exists between the characteristics desired by males and those desired by females.

Literature Review

To begin to understand the structural components of relational ideals, related concepts must be explored. The current research will primarily consider ideal characteristics using the lens of social exchange theory and its conceptual tenet of a comparison level. Interpersonal attraction and relational standards are also an important component of an individual's relational ideals, and will be expounded.

Social Exchange Theory

Social exchange theory (SET) is an interdisciplinary principle used in the research fields of interpersonal communication and social psychology (West, 2006). Social exchange theory developed in the late 1950s and 1960s with George Homans laying the groundwork, along with Peter Blau, John Thibault and Harold Kelley. Though the theory has changed over time and taken many different forms, the framework laid by these first thinkers has been kept in place through out the years. The assumptions of SET are categorized in two ways: human nature and nature of relationships. Both assumptions also study individuals and the relationship between individuals (Thibault & Kelley, 1959; West & Turner, 2007). In addition, Thibault and Kelley try to explain interaction in dyads and other relational decisions using economic concepts like costs and rewards, the comparison level, comparison level for alternatives, and exchange patterns. Homans considers social exchange theory "the exchange of activity tangible or intangible, and more or less rewarding or costly, between at least two persons" (Cook & Rice, 2006, p. 54). Successful relationships must to be maintained through a process of give and take on both sides. Histories are kept within a relationship, which track each of the actors' costs and rewards. These histories have direct effect on the relationship and how it will be weighed in the matter of closeness and loyalties.

Homans also uses the word "punishment" instead of "reward" for certain situations because actions, or cost, have negative reactions, also known as punishments. For instance, if someone gets a positive reaction from an action they will be more likely to repeat it, rather than an action that receives a negative punishment and is a hindrance to the relationship. It is also possible for a relational action or stimulus that repeatedly receives the same positive reward to gradually become less significant.

Some experts revise social exchange theory in an attempt to streamline it. For example, Chadwick-Jones (1976) uses different terminology, calling the relational processes reinforcement and

exchange. Reinforcement is used to initiate strengthening of the relationship and bring people closer together in a kind of circular motion. If there is positive reinforcement there will be a positive exchange resulting, yet again, in a positive form of reinforcement.

According to SET, individuals must decide who is worth their time, how much time is spent and what will be done within that time, as well as what relationships will give them a greater sense of love, or further a career path. This conversation has come to assume people do things within a relationship to get what they want. People want positive outcomes in their lives and this is one way of trying to make that a reality (Heath, 1976). Another interesting idea mentioned in this text would be that of either voluntary or coerced exchange. Many times, individuals are put into situations where they have to respond a certain way in order to keep the relationship continuing, creating a coerced exchange. Voluntary exchange, however, is the most common and popular, as the need for positive rewards/reinforcement is important for people to be happy and respond in a positive fashion (Heath, 1976).

Costs and rewards are explained as indebtedness within a relationship in the context of SET and have been thought of as an equation by some theorists. Gergen, Greenberg and Willis (1980) state, "The relationship is expressed by the following equation: I = B + C, where I refers to the magnitude of indebtedness, B refers to the recipient's perception of the quality of the net benefits received, and C refers to the recipient's perception of the quality of the donor's net costs." (p. 6). Yet again, more new terms are resorted to in attempting to explain social exchange cost and reward in the context of a relationship. The reward is weighed differently for each person and for each interaction there are different understandings of rewards and their values (Gergen, Greenberg and Willis, 1980). If the reward is great to receive, then the cost of giving it will be high, making the trade even in a sense. Everyone has to evaluate systems of costs and rewards to determine what is important to them and what their needs are within a relationship. Once these needs are realized, action can be taken to make sure they are accomplished.

Rewards must outweigh the costs in order for a relationship to properly function. If a relationship starts out with more costs than rewards, without eventually shifting into something healthier, there may be a problem. Relationships shift according to who is in them and what the expectations are within the relationship.

Costs and rewards. When evaluating the outcome of costs and rewards, and how that outcome makes an individual feel, the concepts of SET can be applied and comparison levels are introduced for further explanation. Understanding the worth of costs and rewards in relationships help in the explanation and understanding of SET's concepts of comparison level and comparison level for alternatives, as well as exchange patterns.First, the comparison level (CL) is described as the threshold in which an outcome of a relationship seems attractive or satisfactory (Thibault & Kelley, 1959; Griffin, 1994). Comparison level is a standard that individuals will use in contrast with their outcomes from the costs and rewards. The CL can also be determined by what an individual believes he or she deserves (West, 2006). A second standard is the comparison level for alternatives (CL_{alt}), which Thibault and Kelley defined as the lowest level or standard someone will accept. Each outcome is weighted by its salience, or the strength of instigation (West, 2006). The alternatives are the different options an individual has, such as being in a different relationship or no relationship at all. Although the CL_{alt} may be satisfying, it may not be the most attractive or stable after considering other alternatives (West, 2006). The levels of satisfaction and expectation will vary between different people and different relationships, making it important to understand that satisfaction is a product of an interaction within a person's relationship expectations (Sabatelli, 1988). Whether members decide to stay in the relationship because their expectations are met or leave because their expectations are not met depends on the CL and CL_{alt} in comparison to the outcome.

Table 1

RELATIVE VALUE OF THE OUTCOME, CL AND CL_{alt}	STATE OF THE RELATIONSHIP
Outcome > CL > CL_{alt}	Satisfying and stable
Outcome > CL_{alt} > CL	Satisfying and stable
CL_{alt} > CL > Outcome	Unsatisfying and unstable
CL_{alt} > Outcome > CL	Satisfying and unstable
CL > CL_{alt} > Outcome	Unsatisfying and unstable
CL > Outcome > CL_{alt}	Unsatisfying and unstable

Note: This table was adapted from Roloff, 1981.

Roloff's (1981) "Interpersonal Communication: The Social Exchange Approach" as explained by West & Turner (2007) clarifies this. As shown in Table 1, if the worth of an outcome is greater than the CL and CL_{alt}, the relationship is satisfying and stable and its members are less likely to leave. If the alternative is greater than the CL or outcome, the relationship is unstable and the member may leave in search of other options depending on their satisfaction with the current situation. When the CL is higher than both the outcome and CL_{alt}, the relationship is both unsatisfying and unstable, and the member will most likely leave the relationship. Some members in a relationship may stay although it can be unsatisfying if the alternatives are also unavailable and unsatisfying (Thibault & Kelley, 1959). After learning about the CL, CL_{alt} and worth of outcomes, Thibault and Kelley claimed the formation of relationships depends on the possible outcomes of the interaction, the exploration of alternatives, and if the mutually experienced outcomes are above the CL_{alt} for both members.

Exchange patterns. Thibault and Kelley's research on the exchange patterns in SET correlate with their assumptions about human nature and humans being rational beings (West & Turner, 2007). Within exchange patterns, there are three concepts of behavior, power and matrices. Members of the interaction will behave in such ways to achieve a desired goal. The interdependence between partners leads to another concept of power: the control one has over another. Lawler and Thye (1999) stated that individuals feel secure when their power is either directly or indirectly increased due to a reduction of someone else's power. Such power causes different emotions to arise (e.g. higher power tends to lead to positive emotions). There are two types of power: fate control and behavior control. Thibault and Kelley (1959) described fate control thus: If A varies his or her behavior, A can affect B's outcome regardless of what B's behavior is. Therefore, A has fate over B. The other type of power, behavior control, occurs when person A varies their behavior to vary person B's behavior. Consequently, person A has control over person B. Individuals develop such behavioral patterns to manage differences in power and costs.

In summary, social exchange theory is a complex theory seeking to explore the interaction between individuals in relationships. Many interrelated factors—such as costs, rewards, comparison levels and alternatives, the outcome of the relationship, and behavioral patterns—support Thibault and Kelley's theory. SET provides one with a better knowledge about satisfaction and dissatisfaction, as well as the contributing concepts, within a relationship.

Relationship standards, preferences and alternatives

Though every person has standards they use to evaluate potential partners, these standards differ from person to person. Eastwick, Finkel, and Eagly (2011) state, "people differ in the extent to which various characteristics are important to them in an ideal romantic partner" (p. 1012). This shows that not everyone will want the same type of person in a romantic relationship. What one person sees as a positive characteristic may be seen as a negative one by another. Ideal-perception consistency refers to whether one's ideal partner preferences and the trait one perceives in a romantic partner match (Eastwick et al. 2011).

Eastwick et al. (2011) study was conducted to determine the contexts in which these ideal partner

preferences work in the context of romantic initiation. To measure this, two attraction experiments were conducted. The first experiment measured a participant's romantic reaction to a potential romantic partner's written profile. The second examined a live interaction and the romantic interest that followed. The results from the written profile found that an individual expressed more interest in the person if they had similar ideal preferences. The live interaction supplied some interesting results. When the individuals interacted together the matching of ideals did not have an effect on the romantic interest. The participants were reinterpreting the meaning of these traits when they met the other person, but on paper this was not a feasible solution (Eastwick et al. 2011).

The overall findings on this study suggest that having similar ideals and traits become less important in actual interactions. When an individual reads a dating profile online or hears from a secondary source, these ideal partner preferences are much more relevant. When physical interaction begins, such as on a date, the need for the ideals become less crucial to the romantic interest. Having a set of standards is not necessarily a bad thing, but it seems to be less important when a relationship is actually beginning with another individual. The list of requirements that we have for our perspective partners may not be as important as previously thought.

Social exchange theory states that interactions can be viewed as the sharing of resources. These resources range from money, to love, to services, to information. Interacting can also be seen as negotiating the exchange of resources (Littlejohn & Foss, 2009). With this in mind it seems that individuals who are expecting more resources out of a relationship may function differently than those who expect less resources.

Finkel, Molden, Johnson, and Eastwick (2009) found that, "individuals who are more broadly oriented toward eagerly pursuing gains (promotion-focused individuals) generally attend more closely to romantic alternatives, evaluate them more positively, and pursue them more vigorously than do individuals who are broadly oriented toward vigilantly protecting against losses (prevention focused individuals)" (p. 320). Romantic alternatives refer to both substitutes for a particular romantic partner and the romantic possibilities of singles. Research has found an individual's perception of romantic alternatives greatly influence the outcomes of that particular relationship (Finkel et al. 2009).

When a person is not content within a relationship they will look for alternatives (e.g. singleness or a new partner). This manner of thinking unavoidably leads to the detriment of the current relationship. We cannot have everything we want in a partner. Rusbult, Onizuka & Lipkus (1993) illustrate this point by stating, "the odds are good that the match between actual and ideal involvement frequently is less than perfect" (p. 494). There will never be someone that lives up to each and every relationship standard. We must set aside some of these expectations and relational ideals to have a successful relationship with another.

There has not been an abundance of research done on this topic. Simpson, Fletcher, and Campbell (2003) point out that "very little research has examined either the content of partner and relationship ideals or the process by which such standards might influence the happiness and stability of romantic relationships" (p. 89). It is difficult to discover these facts because individuals internalize most of this information. They certainly do not tell their significant other about their relational ideals due to the damaging effect it could have on the relationship. Relationships can contain "hidden others," which are real or ideal people who affect the relationship (Simpson et al. 2003). Among such "hidden others" would be the ideal image of what an individual wants their romantic partner to be, which is sometimes based on an actual person outside the relationship. Not much is known about how exactly this affects the relationship, but it most certainly could have negative long-term repercussions.

Past research does support the theory that individuals evaluate current relationships in two different ways. First they look at whether or not they are receiving the benefits that they "deserve" from the current relationship. The second they determine the degree to which the current relationship exceeds the outcome of best alternative partner (Simpson et al. 2003). These examinations are known as comparison levels. This is how we evaluate current relationships to ensure that it is the best path for our

happiness.

Relationship ideals are something that each individual has. These ideals serve two primary functions: evaluative and regulatory. If the ideals are consistent with the actual relationship then the outlook of the relationship tends to be more positive. The ideals are the basis of evaluating and regulating or controlling what goes on within the relationship. A study conducted by Fletcher, Simpson, Thomas, and Giles (1991) examined common ideals of a relationship and a partner. They found that ideal partner qualities consisted of warmth-trustworthiness, vitality-attractiveness, and status-resources. The traits of an ideal relationship were discovered to be intimacy-loyalty, and passion. The study found that the higher consistency that existed between these relationship and partner ideals the more positive the current relationship was evaluated (Fletcher et al. 1999).

Interpersonal Attraction

Another significant factor in this study is that of interpersonal attraction. Unfortunately, this phenomenon is complicated, if not nearly impossible to distinguish. Not only are there many facets and aspects to interpersonal attraction, but observation and quantification is often marred by self-reporting bias.

The first and perhaps most subconscious understanding of attraction comes from an evolutionary standpoint, that is that humans are attracted to other humans who have the most ideal reproductive qualities. Reproductive reasons for attraction almost always exist as physical features of a person. Symmetrical physical bodies are perceived as more attractive (Møller, 1997; Møller & Thornhill, 1997; Trivers, Manning, Thornhill, Singh, & McGuire, 1999). Faces that are more symmetrical are also judged as more attractive (Grammer & Thornhill, 1994; Mealy, Bridgestock, & Townsend, 1999). Youthful faces are seen as more attractive (Cunningham, Barbee, & Pike, 1990; Jones, 1995). Traits that are average and not notable are also found attractive (Koeslag & Koeslag, 1994, Langlois, Roggmen, & Musselman, 1994). From this viewpoint one can attribute the certain attractions to universal human processes.

A second understanding of attraction is the cognitivist approach or information processing theory. Information processing states that humans are attracted to other humans primarily because of what they know about the other person (Ajzen, 1977). Within information processing, two distinct viewpoints exist: the mechanistic approach and the constructive approach (Ajzen, 1977). The former holds that attraction is based on single pieces of information known about the other, while the latter adds that attraction is also influenced by one's interpretation of the information known about the other as a whole (Ajzen, 1977).

Perhaps the most influential classes of theory in the study of interpersonal attraction are exchange theories such as Stimulus-Value-Role Theory and Social Exchange Theory. Stimulus-Value-Role theory expands further on this groundwork of social exchange by adding a relational stage model (Murstein, 1977). The initial stage of a relationship is stimulus, in which the two individuals are attracted to parts of the other's person or character (Murstein, 1977). The relationship then moves into the value stage, in which social exchanges play out most prominently and individuals investigate whether or not the relationship is worth pursuing further (Murstein, 1977). Finally the role stage of the relationship occurs when relational norms have solidified and the individuals relate based on the roles that they expect each other to play (Murstein, 1977).

Methods

Participants

Participants in our study consisted of 212 undergraduate students at a Midwestern university. Individuals were selected as part of a random sample of 800 undergraduate students at the university. The participants were composed of 67 (31%) males and 147 (69%) females. The vast majority of respondents identified themselves as White/Caucasian (94%); 1% identified themselves as African American, 2% as Asian, and 3% as Other. Less than one percent of participants identified themselves as Hispanic. The median age of respondents was 20 years old. Seventy five respondents (35%) identified as Protestant

Christian, 15 (7%) as Catholic Christian, 101 (47%) as Evangelical Christian, 2 (<1%) as Atheist/Agnostic/Unsure, and 21 (10%) Other. 33 respondents (15%) identified as a freshman by credits, 58 (27%) as a sophomore, 51 (24%) as a junior, 67 (31%) as a senior, and 4 respondents (2%) choosing Other.

Procedure

Participants were asked to complete a survey that inquired about their ideals in romantic relationships and their actual significant others from one to two previous relationships (if applicable) in the past four years. The survey was distributed by email and individuals who wished to participate were directed to the survey by clicking a hyperlink. A large portion of the survey was based on a list of characteristics that are attractive to individuals in a potential partner and was taken from Fletcher et al. (1999). This instrument will be referred to as the Ideal Partner Scale or IPS. The full list of the 50 characteristics is available in Appendix A. "Good relationship with family" was added to account for the potential desire for partners to have strong familial connections. The IPS attempts to cover a wide range of attractive characteristics in potential partners that fall into three sub-scores: warmth-trustworthiness, vitality-attractiveness and status-resources (Fletcher et al. 1999). These sub-scores were later used to assess the results of the study.

Participants were first asked to indicate how important a series of 50 characteristics were to them in an ideal relationship. Individuals responded on a Likert–type scale with response options ranging from "Not important at all" to "Extremely important." Participants were then asked to indicate how well the same list of characteristics described their significant others in past relationships. Individuals who had been in two relationships were presented with the list two times, with "Relationship 1" signifying the most recent relationship and "Relationship 2" signifying a prior relationship. Participants were also asked to indicate how long their relationships lasted and how the current state of their relationships could be described in an attempt to account for individuals judging relationships that ended in a poorer light than when these relationships began.

Results

To assess whether a significant difference existed between ideal significant others and actual significant others (H_1) in respondents' most recent relationship, a paired samples t test was run. A significant difference existed between scores for warmth-trustworthiness, vitality-attractiveness and status-resources. The mean for warmth-trustworthiness was significantly higher for the ideal significant other (M = 98.30, SD = 7.90) than the most recent real relationship (M = 93.93, SD = 14.43), $t(151) = 3.74$, $p < .01$. The mean for vitality-attractiveness was significantly lower for the ideal significant other (M = 68.59, SD = 6.60) than the most recent real relationship (M = 70.77, SD = 10.45), $t(151) = -2.44$, $p = .016$. The mean for status-resources was significantly lower for the ideal significant other (M = 30.89, SD = 4.80) than the most recent real relationship (M = 34.90, SD = 4.97), $t(151) = -8.33$, $p < .01$.

Table 1

	Sex	Mean	SD
Ideal Warmth-Trustworthiness Sub-Score	Male	95.3731	7.14956
	Female	99.6122	7.80362
Ideal Vitality-Attractiveness Sub-Score	Male	68.4627	6.53273
	Female	68.1088	7.16262
Ideal Status-Resources Sub-Score	Male	29.6716	4.60365
	Female	31.4490	4.92712

An independent-samples t test was conducted to evaluate the difference in conceptualizations of ideal significant others between males and females. The difference between males and females was significant for partner warmth-trustworthiness, $t(212) = -3.781$, $p < .01$, and partner status-resources, $t(212) = -2.497$, $p = .013$, but not for partner vitality-attractiveness, $t(212) = 0.344$, $p = .731$. Table 1 details the means and standard deviations for the three sub-scores of ideal partners for both males and females.

Table 2

Female	Understanding Supportive Considerate Good listener Warm Reliable Friendly Communicative Stable Broad-minded Self-aware Generous Good relationship with family Independent Ambitious Assertive Good job Financially secure Nice house or apartment Successful Does not smoke
Male	Nice body Sexy Attractive Appropriate ethnicity

To assess the differences in specific characteristics of ideal significant others for males and females (H2), an independent samples t test was run. The means, standard deviations and test data for all characteristics can be found in Appendix B. Table 2 details the characteristics that were significantly more important for either gender. For example, "nice body" was significantly more important for males than for females.In order to assess the possibility of a relationship between current relational satisfaction and the three sub-scores given by respondents for each of their real relationships, a bivariate correlation was run. The relationships for each of the three sub-scores were significant and are detailed in Tables 3 and 4. Table 3 details the data for relationship 1, the most recent, and Table 4 details the data for relationship 2, the former. The test indicates that there is, for both significant others, a moderate to strong relationship between current relational satisfaction and the scores given.

Table 3

		Relational satisfaction
Warmth-Trustworthiness (Relationship #1)	Correlation	.705**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0.000
	N	152
Vitality-Attractiveness (Relationship #1)	Correlation	.566**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0.000
	N	152
Status-Resources (Relationship #1)	Correlation	.312**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0.000
	N	152
**. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).		

Table 4

		Relational satisfaction
Warmth-Trustworthiness (Relationship #2)	Correlation	.548**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0
	N	55
Vitality-Attractiveness (Relationship #2)	Correlation	.379**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0.004
	N	55
Status-Resources (Relationship #2)	Correlation	.296*
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0.028
	N	55
**. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).		

Discussion

Disparity Between Ideals and Actual Relationships

The most important and indicative result of the research is that respondents indicated that the characteristics of the Ideal Partner Scale (Fletcher et al. 1999) were different from the levels of those characteristics in their actual significant others. It is important to note in which sub-scores and in which direction. For warmth-trustworthiness the ideal scores were significantly higher than either of the actual relationship scores, meaning that the respondents had higher standards in mind than their partners actually lived up to. The disparity in this result indicates strikingly that recent actual relationships do not live up to the standards that most people have in the category of warmth-trustworthiness. Individuals engaged in relationships that do not adhere to the standards they have for their relationships.

In regards to vitality-attractiveness, the two actual relationships differed. For the more recent actual relationship, vitality-attractiveness scores were significantly lower than the ideals values supplied by participants, but for the former relationship, scores were significantly higher. There are two possible explanations for this. The first is that of the respondents, the number that had two relationships in the previous four years was notably lower than those that were only involved in one relationship. Thus the sample size for the former relationships was much fewer than that of the more recent or current relationship. Because of this, it is possible the scores for the former relationships are not an accurate view of individuals with two or more relationships. A second explanation relates to the age and life station of the participants. Since most were undergraduates at a university, respondents may have been referring to relationships from their high school days, bringing their total number of relationships over the previous four years up to two or more. Though relationships in teenage years may be indicative of the types of people one would be attracted to in adulthood, it is likely that romantic tastes adjust as an individual matures throughout the four years following high school. Thus the scores given to the former relationships may have differed from the most recent relationships because individuals' tastes have evolved into a more accurate picture of the types of people they will find attractive throughout adult life.

The sub-score of status-resources remains consistent between both subsets of relational data; individuals rated their actual relationships higher than the ideal significant other. This is easy to explain. Status-resources are not as important to individuals as the other two sub-scores. The mean value for the status resource sub-score is significantly lower than the value for both warmth-trustworthiness and vitality-attractiveness, meaning that characteristics like "appropriate ethnicity," "nice house/apartment" and "successful" are less consciously important to respondents than "warm," "affectionate" and "understanding.". In other words, people find intrinsic characteristics more important than extrinsic ones. This is especially true at a private university with strong religious connections like the one at which the study was conducted.

Gender Differences

Secondary findings of the research were the difference between genders in ideal conceptions of significant others and the differences between those ideals and real relationships. For both the ideals of warmth-trustworthiness and status-resources, females indicated significantly higher scores than men. For vitality-attractiveness, the difference between males and females was not significant. As for ideal and real relationships, the only significant difference was between the ideals and the most recent real relationship for status-resources. Notable are the differences in each gender's unique choice of specific characteristics. Figure 1 details the traits which females considered more important than males, and vice versa. Every trait that is more important to males is a physical characteristic, while females indicate more intrinsic, emotional characteristics, suggesting that while females look to a significant other for support and comfort, males look to a significant other for sexual needs.

Current Relational Satisfaction

To assess the potential effects of a bad dissolution of a recent relationship on the scores given respondents were asked to indicate their current satisfaction with the relationship after giving their scores for the IPS characteristics. The results of the bivariate correlation indicate that for both real relationships, the rating of the current relational satisfaction predicted the scores of warmth-trustworthiness, vitality-attractiveness and status-resources. Perhaps individuals who currently are dissatisfied with their relationships, possibly because of a bad breakup, are significantly biased in reporting the characteristics of their former significant other. This has a grain of truth to it, for anyone assessing the other partner in a dyad will likely be at least marginally biased depending on current satisfaction in the relationship. Negative feelings are strong psychological factors and their potential to affect the results of this study cannot be overlooked.

It is also possible, however, that significant others who receive higher scores on the IPS are more likely to conduct relationships in a way that makes being a part of the dyad or the end of the relationship satisfying for the other participant. For example, individuals who are "considerate," "understanding," "honest," and "reliable" will probably end relationships in positive ways for the other person, leaving a positive view of the partner after the split. Similarly, it is likely that individuals who have a good job do not have as satisfying relationships as individuals who are trustworthy. Support for this comes from the moderately strong correlation between relational satisfaction and warmth-trustworthiness scores, as opposed to the only slightly positive correlation between relational satisfaction and status-resources scores. The high amount of satisfaction in the most recent relationships also indicates that this explanation is valuable since there are few respondents who are belligerently maligning their former relationships. Even if respondents are biased towards providing a more positive view of their significant others than is true, the difference between ideals and real relationships still remains significant.

The results indicate that while the difference between individuals' ideals for significant others and the attributes of their actual significant others (H_1), the only area in which the ideals are higher than the real scores is the characteristic of warmth-trustworthiness. Also worthy of note is the disparity between male and female ideals for relationships (H_2) and the strong positive correlation between relational satisfaction and the score of ideal characteristics.

Limitations

The most prominent limitation of the current study is that individuals reported subjectively about their own ideals and real significant others. A more robust design might have included a survey that was sent to a respondent's significant other in an attempt to obtain a more accurate understanding of the significant other's characteristics. Being able to better assess the significant other's actual—not just perceived—characteristics would have allowed for a more complete comparison with the individual's ideal characteristics.

Another limitation is the population sampled for the survey. Though undergraduate students are adults and have a good conception of what they look for in a potential significant other, the process of creating and discovering identity and desires is still occurring during this time and respondents may not have accurately indicated their desires or know what their desires will be in several years. Conducting a survey with single people in their 30s might yield different results.

The religiosity of respondents may have also limited the results. Since the survey was conducted at a private university, the values associated with religious belief may have been reflected disproportionately in the results. Religious individuals tend to shy away from portraying themselves or appraising one person over another for extrinsic reasons. Perhaps this is why the sub-score for status-resources is significantly lower than the score for warmth-trustworthiness.

Future Research

One interesting avenue for potential future research would explore the disparity between genders in the ideal characteristics, as well as the reasoning behind the differences and related concepts. Research investigating this area may eventually overlap with developing research about gender and sex roles, but the implications for this research are interesting nonetheless.

Another engaging area of study is to probe the polarization of ideals described in the limitations. A study trying to discover the threshold at which characteristics are apparent in significant others would prove useful in determining the validity of the results of the current research. Similarly, studying the perception of certain characteristics and their correlation with relational satisfaction might reveal ways to conduct this study in a more highly calibrated manner.

One final area worthy of further research is the relationship between religiosity and religious ideals. A similar study at a public university would enable comparisons between the ideals and the differences between ideals and real relationships based on religiosity and religious belief. Regardless of any difference that exists, the research would prove useful in analyzing relationships. Since many religious individuals claim to be different from non-religious individuals in their morals and ideals, it may be possible that there is no difference and any sense of propriety based in such a belief would be misplaced. It also would be enlightening to find a significant difference, as it would highlight the effects of religion on such ideals.

Appendix A

Ideal Partner Scale Characteristics

Warmth-Trustworthiness		Vitality-Attractiveness	Status-Resources
Understanding	Honest	Adventurous	Good job
Supportive	Mature	Nice body	Financially secure
Considerate	Stable	Outgoing	Nice house or apartment
Kind	Romantic	Sexy	Appropriate ethnicity
Good listener	Broad-minded	Attractive	Successful
Sensitive	Easygoing	Good lover	Dresses well
Trustworthy	Self-aware	Active lifestyle	Appropriate age
Warm	Generous	Sporty and athletic	Religious beliefs
Affectionate	Deals well with criticism	Confident	Does not smoke
Reliable	Likes children	Independent	
Friendly	Good relationship with family	Ambitious	
Communicative		Interesting	
		Spontaneous	
		Good fun	
		Good sense of humor	
		Assertive	
		Creative	
		Intelligent	

Appendix B

	Sex	M	SD	t	df	Sig.
Understanding	Male	4.24	0.495	–3.458	212	0.001
	Female	4.50	0.528			
Considerate	Male	4.27	0.566	–3.915	212	0.000
	Female	4.58	0.522			
Good listener	Male	4.15	0.680	–3.806	212	0.000
	Female	4.50	0.590			
Warm	Male	3.94	0.574	–2.097	212	0.037
	Female	4.14	0.658			
Reliable	Male	4.42	0.581	–2.516	212	0.009
	Female	4.63	0.513			
Friendly	Male	4.24	0.605	–2.14	212	0.033
	Female	4.44	0.631			
Communicative	Male	4.30	0.551	–2.85	212	0.005
	Female	4.54	0.577			
Stable	Male	4.12	0.663	–2.718	212	0.007
	Female	4.37	0.598			
Broad–minded	Male	3.58	0.819	–2.403	212	0.017
	Female	3.87	0.813			
Self–aware	Male	3.87	0.625	–2.835	212	0.005
	Female	4.13	0.633			
Generous	Male	3.87	0.716	–3.06	212	0.002
	Female	4.17	0.656			

Appendix B, continued

Good relationship with family	Male	4.10	0.907	–2.128	212	0.034
	Female	4.35	0.738			
Nice body	Male	3.66	0.827	4.539	212	0.000
	Female	3.16	0.709			
Sexy	Male	3.69	0.957	4.119	212	0.000
	Female	3.12	0.933			
Attractive	Male	4.07	0.681	4.293	212	0.000
	Female	3.60	0.782			
Independent	Male	3.60	0.719	–2.837	212	0.005
	Female	3.91	0.767			
Ambitious	Male	3.76	0.720	–3.286	212	0.001
	Female	4.10	0.676			
Assertive	Male	3.42	0.819	–3.431	212	0.000
	Female	3.81	0.666			
Good job	Male	2.93	0.858	–4.61	212	0.000
	Female	3.50	0.847			
Financially secure	Male	2.96	0.727	–5.327	212	0.000
	Female	3.57	0.899			
Nice house or apartment	Male	2.22	0.885	–3.278	212	0.001
	Female	2.66	0.910			
Appropriate ethnicity	Male	2.63	1.191	2.378	212	0.018
	Female	2.22	1.127			
Successful	Male	3.13	0.851	–3.415	212	0.001
	Female	3.56	0.837			
Does not smoke	Male	4.18	1.029	–1.992	212	0.048
	Female	4.44	0.829			

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