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When and Why Do Ideal Partner Preferences Affect the
Process of Initiating and Maintaining Romantic Relationships?

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ABSTRACT

Three studies explored how the traits that people ideally desire in a romantic partner, or *ideal partner preferences*, intersect with the process of romantic relationship initiation and maintenance. Two attraction experiments in the laboratory found that, when participants evaluated a potential romantic partner's written profile, they expressed more romantic interest in a partner whose traits were manipulated to match (vs. mismatch) their idiosyncratic ideals. However, after a live interaction with the partner, the match vs. mismatch manipulation was no longer associated with romantic interest. This pattern appeared to have emerged because participants reinterpreted the meaning of the traits as they applied to the partner, a context effect predicted by classic models of person perception (S. E. Asch, 1946). Finally, a longitudinal study of middle-aged adults demonstrated that participants evaluated a current romantic partner (but not a partner who was merely desired) more positively to the extent that the partner matched their overall pattern of ideals across several traits; the match in level of ideals (i.e., high versus low ratings) was not relevant to participants' evaluations. In general, the match between ideals and a partner's traits may predict relational outcomes when participants are learning about a partner in the abstract and when they are actually in a relationship with the partner, but not when considering potential dating partners they have met in person.

KEYWORDS: ideal partner preferences, person perception, relationships, attraction

When and Why Do Ideal Partner Preferences Affect the Process of Initiating and Maintaining Romantic Relationships?

The most attractive, charismatic, and congenial person that you know will still fail to inspire romantic desire in everyone that he or she meets. While most will swoon, at least a few will be immune to his or her charms, a phenomenon that inspires the question: Why do people differ in the extent to which they desire a particular person as a romantic partner? A complete answer is surely multifaceted, but perhaps the most intuitive answer is that people differ in the extent to which various characteristics are important to them in an ideal romantic partner. That is, the skeptics might be less desirous of your charismatic acquaintance than the general masses because they desire other characteristics in an ideal partner. Alternatively, once the skeptics (finally) encounter potential romantic partners who do match their idiosyncratic ideals, presumably they would experience strong romantic desire.

Research on ideal partner preferences stretches back to the middle of the last century (Hill, 1945) and is exemplified by Buss' (1989) ambitious survey of mate preferences across 37 cultures. This literature has often examined whether men and women differ in the importance they place on certain traits in a partner and whether those differences vary as a function of mating context (Li & Kenrick, 2006) or the societal division of labor (Eagly & Wood, 1999). Recently, scholars have started to explore the “downstream” consequences of ideal partner preferences: Are people more likely to desire a romantic partner to the extent that the partner matches their ideals? For example, Fletcher and colleagues found that participants tended to report greater relationship quality and were less likely to end their relationship to the extent that their current partner matched their ideals (Fletcher, Simpson, & Thomas, 2000; Fletcher, Simpson, Thomas, & Giles, 1999). Yet evidence from attraction contexts paints a different picture: One study of speed-daters found that participants' ideal partner preferences did not predict their romantic interest either at the speed-

dating event itself or during the following month (Eastwick & Finkel, 2008, see also Todd, Penke, Fasolo, & Lenton, 2007).

In an attempt to reconcile these discrepant findings, the present set of three studies sought to clarify the role that ideal partner preferences play in determining whom people select and retain as romantic partners. Specifically, these studies tested whether the match between one's ideal partner preferences and the traits that one perceives in a romantic partner (i.e., *ideal-perceived trait match*, or what Fletcher et al., 2000, called *ideal-perception consistency*) predicts relational outcomes across several different contexts. Theory and prior research on this topic suggested two possible pairs of contexts that might reveal differences in the predictive validity of the ideal-perceived trait match. The first pair of contexts, examined in Studies 1 and 2, consists of two possible ways of meeting and learning about a potential romantic partner: viewing a written profile versus interacting face-to-face. The second pair of contexts, examined in Study 3, refers to two phases or stages of relationship involvement: desiring versus actually having a relationship with a romantic partner. We predicted that the match between ideals and the perceived traits in a romantic partner would predict relationship outcomes when participants (a) evaluate a written profile but not a live potential partner and (b) evaluate a current partner but not a partner with whom they merely desire a relationship.

The Structure and Function of Ideal Partner Preferences

Classic interdependence theory perspectives suggest that people compare the outcomes (i.e., costs and rewards) they receive in a particular relationship with the outcomes that they deserve or expect (i.e., comparison level, Thibaut & Kelley, 1959). These expectations are influenced by a variety of dispositional and situational factors, including the traits that people bring to mind when they envision their ideal relationship partner (Fletcher et al., 1999). After all, a romantic partner's positive (e.g., warm) and negative (e.g., demanding) traits have interpersonal

consequences for the self (Leary, 1957, Wiggins, 1979), and thus people evaluate their relationship partners differently depending on the traits that they perceive in those partners. Importantly, when people consider romantic partners in the abstract, they differ in their beliefs about how a partner's traits will affect their own life outcomes, and these beliefs affect the extent to which traits characterize people's ideal romantic partners (Eagly, Eastwick, & Johannesen-Schmidt, 2009). This idiosyncratic variation in ideals is at the core of the processes explored in this manuscript.

The current research examines the circumstances under which relational outcomes (e.g., romantic desire, commitment) are predicted by the match between (a) the traits that characterize one's ideal romantic partner and (b) one's perception of the traits of a specific individual who is or has the potential to be a romantic partner. We refer to this predictive association between ideal-perceived trait match and relational outcomes as the *predictive validity hypothesis* for ideal partner preferences. One straightforward test of the predictive validity hypothesis is that the presence of a trait in a partner should better predict relational outcomes among participants who ideally desire it than among those who do not. For example, given that men rate physical attractiveness as more important in a mate than women do, a partner's physical attractiveness should better predict romantic desire among men than among women (see Eastwick & Finkel, 2008). Indeed, Buss recognized the importance of such predictive validity tests: "Personal preferences, if they are to bear the conceptual importance ascribed to them in this study, should be reflected to some degree in actual mating decisions" (Buss, 1989, p. 9).

Despite the theoretical plausibility of the hypothesis that the match between ideals and a partner's traits should predict relational outcomes, prior studies reveal discrepant findings on this point. In an effort to clarify and organize this literature, we offer distinctions between two pairs of contexts—one rooted in attraction research (e.g., Gold, Ryckman, & Mosley, 1984) and one

rooted in relationships research (e.g., Fletcher et al., 1999). Given established social psychological theory and prior empirical findings, we anticipate that the ideal-perceived trait match will predict relational outcomes in some contexts but not in others.

Context Pair #1: Meeting “On Paper” Versus in a Live Interaction

In contemporary Western culture, it is common for people to meet and evaluate each other in person before they become involved in a romantic relationship, and many paradigmatic studies of attraction reflect this norm by having participants evaluate potential romantic partners whom they have just met in person (e.g., Byrne, Ervin, & Lamberth, 1970; Gold et al., 1984; Walster, Aronson, Abrahams, & Rottman, 1966; White, Fishbein, & Rutsein, 1981). At times, however, people evaluate potential romantic partners after merely hearing or reading about a brief description of the individual; the classic personal ad study (e.g., Harrison & Saeed, 1977) and recent investigations of online dating (e.g., Hitsch, Hortaçsu, & Ariely, 2010) shed light on this method of meeting potential partners.

Yet these two attraction contexts may differ in important ways. People often process and evaluate a stimulus differently when they have on-line, immediate, and direct experience with it (e.g., interacting with an object in the “here and now”, using the features of a consumer product) than when they have off-line, delayed, or indirect experience with it (e.g., considering a hypothetical object, reading a consumer product description). For example, people prefer consumer products that provide an enjoyable experience (e.g., ease of use) when they interact with it directly, but they prefer products that have an appealing description (e.g., many features) when they interact with it indirectly (Hamilton & Thompson, 2007). Consistent with Construal Level Theory (Trope & Liberman, 2003, 2010), direct experience with an attitude object triggers a concrete, low-level mental construal, whereas indirect experience with an attitude object triggers an abstract, high-level mental construal. Importantly, people make evaluations using global trait

concepts (like those assessed in research on ideal partner preferences; e.g., friendliness, creativity, extraversion) when in a high-level mental construal, but they make evaluations using specific, contextualized behaviors when in a low-level mental construal (Nussbaum, Trope, & Liberman, 2003; see also Mischel & Shoda, 1995, Semin & Fiedler, 1988). In light of this distinction, we expect that ideal partner preferences for traits would have a stronger impact on participants' evaluations in an indirect, abstract context (i.e., reading a description of a potential partner) than in a direct, concrete context (i.e., meeting a live potential partner).

The previous literature provides some preliminary support for this hypothesis. One recent study found that the ideal-perceived trait match for qualities such as “well-groomed”, “seductive”, and “conventional” predicted participants' romantic interest in opposite-sex photographs (Wood & Brumbaugh, 2009). In addition, when heterosexual participants view internet dating profiles or personal ads, the physical attractiveness of the stimuli predicts men's evaluations more than women's and the earning prospects of the stimuli predict women's evaluations more than men's (Feingold, 1990, 1992; Hitsch et al., 2010; Townsend & Wasserman, 1998). Given that parallel sex differences emerge for ideal partner preferences (Buss, 1989), these data imply that ideals for these traits influenced romantic interest in these paradigms. In contrast, these sex differences tend to disappear when participants report their romantic interest in individuals with whom they have interacted (Eastwick & Finkel, 2008; Feingold, 1990; Speed & Gangestad, 1997). Therefore, we hypothesized that social interaction with potential partners may reduce the influence of the ideal-perceived trait match on romantic interest. Studies 1 and 2 compared the “on paper” (e.g., evaluating a written profile) and live paradigms and explored whether a brief live interaction with a potential partner would be sufficient to eliminate any predictive effect of the ideal-perceived trait match. Furthermore, Study 2 explored one possible mechanism for this effect: Perhaps a live interaction affords people the opportunity to contextualize a potential partner's traits as part of a

whole person (Asch, 1946), which in turn makes the comparison between a partner's traits and abstract ideals less straightforward.

Context Pair #2: Having Versus Not Having a Romantic Relationship with a Partner

In contrast to the typical attraction paradigm in which participants evaluate romantic targets whom they have met only briefly (if at all), relationships researchers frequently assess participants' impressions, feelings, and thoughts about people with whom they have an enduring relationship (Berscheid & Regan, 2005). Research inspired by the Ideal Standards Model (Fletcher & Simpson, 2000) has examined the functioning of ideal partner preferences within this enduring-relationship paradigm, specifically addressing how the ideal-perceived trait match affects people's evaluations of their current romantic partner (Fletcher et al., 1999, 2000; Overall et al., 2006). As noted above, this program of research has demonstrated that the extent to which participants' romantic partners match their ideal partner preferences predicts relationship quality and stability. These findings are consistent with the interdependence theory perspective that people compare their relationship outcomes to their idiosyncratic standards for what a relationship should provide, and that the results of this comparison color their feelings about their partner and their relationship (Thibaut & Kelley, 1959).

But should the Ideal Standards Model apply to all contexts in which people evaluate someone for whom they experience romantic interest in their daily life? Consider the evaluation of a desired, but not current, romantic partner: On the one hand, it is certainly plausible that people would evaluate this potential partner favorably or unfavorably depending on the extent to which the partner matched their ideals. Although this hypothesis was not supported by speed-dating research (Eastwick & Finkel, 2008; Todd et al., 2007), perhaps speed-daters simply lack the time and information necessary to thoughtfully evaluate each other in that context. If people instead interact with potential partners over a period of months or years and achieve confidence in the

partners' characteristics, then perhaps the ideal-perceived trait match would predict relational outcomes (e.g., romantic passion) regarding a desired partner.

On the other hand, perhaps the key variable is not how well two people know each other but rather the status of their relationship—that is, whether the individuals are involved in a romantic relationship or not. In live attraction contexts, people's judgments about potential partners may not be influenced by careful deliberation but rather by the spontaneous affect that those partners inspire (Eastwick, Eagly, Finkel, & Johnson, 2011). Furthermore, even when people are romantically interested in (but not officially dating) a potential partner for a lengthy period of time, interdependence between them typically remains low because their day-to-day activities and their futures are not strongly intertwined (Solomon & Knobloch, 2004). With little interdependence, people may not be motivated to evaluate their “relationship” outcomes against their standards because the romantic relationship to be evaluated does not (yet) exist, and therefore no major life sacrifices (e.g., forsaking desirable alternatives, moving to a new location) are required to sustain it (Agnew, Rusbult, Van Lange, & Langston, 1998). But once a relationship has begun and a couple identity has been forged, interdependence is likely to increase as two partners coordinate life activities and encounter choice points (e.g., the decision to move in together) that force them to carefully evaluate their relationship against their standards (Gagné & Lydon, 2004). Drawing from this logic, in Study 3 we hypothesized that the ideal-perceived trait match would predict relational outcomes among participants who are evaluating a current romantic partner but not a desired romantic partner with whom they do not officially have a relationship.

The Current Research

Three studies examined the predictive validity of the match between participants' ideal partner preferences and the traits of a potential or actual romantic partner. Studies 1 and 2

emulated classic attraction paradigms (e.g., Gold et al., 1984; White et al., 1981) to examine the predictive validity hypothesis in the first pair of contexts. Specifically, these two studies examined relationship initiation in the laboratory and manipulated both (a) the manner in which participants met a potential romantic partner (“on paper” vs. “in person”) and (b) the degree to which the partner’s attributes matched the participants’ ideals. Study 2 also explored the possibility that participants reinterpret the meaning of a potential romantic partner’s traits after a live interaction and that this contextualization process interferes with their ability to compare those traits with their ideal preferences.

Study 3 drew from relationship research paradigms (e.g., Fletcher et al., 2000; Rusbult, 1980) by examining people’s evaluations of an individual for whom they experience romantic interest in their daily life. In this study, an older sample of participants who were either single or involved in a romantic relationship offered a test of the predictive validity hypothesis across the second pair of contexts: Does the ideal-perceived trait match better predict relationship-relevant outcomes if participants have (vs. have not) established a relationship with a partner? In asking single participants to evaluate individuals with whom they desire to have a romantic relationship, this study serves as a bridge between the typical attraction research paradigm, which examines initial impressions of potential romantic partners, and the typical relationships research paradigm, which examines participants’ evaluations of established relationship partners.

In one of the more comprehensive studies of the structure and content of people’s ideal partner preferences, Fletcher and colleagues (1999) developed an extensive list of the traits that appeal to people in an ideal romantic partner; we draw heavily from these traits in Studies 1 and 3. However, people also have ideals for traits that are not normatively desirable. For example, people differ in the extent to which they find various negative qualities to be undesirable (versus tolerable) in an ideal romantic partner (e.g., neuroticism; Figueredo, Sefcek, & Jones, 2006;

Zentner, 2005). Also, for other traits, people vary considerably in their ideal ratings even if the trait is normatively neutral (e.g., political conservatism; Buss & Barnes, 1986; Watson et al., 2004). To ensure that our results generalize beyond positive traits, we included some of these less normatively desirable traits in Studies 2 and 3. Finally, although the focus in the present article is on the predictive validity of participants' idiosyncratic preferences for particular characteristics in an ideal romantic partner, we will test for sex differences in these processes because they have been prominently featured in this literature.

STUDY 1

Study 1 provided an experimental test of the predictive validity hypothesis: Will participants express greater romantic interest in a potential romantic partner to the extent that the partner matches their romantic ideals, and will the influence of the ideal-perceived trait match depend on whether the participant experiences the confederate indirectly or directly (Hamilton & Thompson, 2007)? The previous literature suggests that the ideal-perceived trait match may predict participants' romantic interest in indirect contexts such as online profiles or personal ads (Wood & Brumbaugh, 2009), but not in direct contexts such as live attraction settings where participants are reporting on potential partners whom they have recently met (Eastwick & Finkel, 2008; Todd et al., 2007). To examine this phenomenon more closely than has prior research, we conducted an experiment in which participants interacted with an opposite-sex confederate. Participants' romantic interest in this confederate was assessed twice: Once after participants had been provided with written information that the confederate either did or did not match their ideal preferences, and once immediately after a brief live interaction.

Participants should express more romantic interest in the ideal relative to the nonideal confederate after examining the confederate's written profile. However, this difference should not emerge after interacting with the confederate, even if the interaction contained little information

that could confirm or contradict what the participant learned in the profile. In other words, we hypothesized that it is the live interaction itself that interferes with the effect of the ideal-perceived trait match on romantic interest.

Method

Participants

Participants were 106 Northwestern University undergraduates who completed the experiment as part of a course requirement. Four participants were excluded from analyses for failing the manipulation check, and two participants were excluded because they responded with a “1” to the statement “I am exclusively attracted to members of the opposite sex” (1=*strongly disagree*, 9=*strongly agree*) on a questionnaire at the end of the study. The remaining 100 participants (45 men, 55 women) were 18.8 years old on average ($SD=0.7$ years); the racial/ethnic breakdown was 4% African-American, 19% Asian-American, 67% Caucasian, 4% Hispanic, and 6% other. Single participants were selected for the study (using data collected at a mass-testing session early in the academic quarter) so that the experimental procedures would be maximally involving. This study employed three male and three female confederates who worked in opposite-sex pairs. The member of the pair who was the same sex as the participant served as the experimenter while the opposite-sex member of the pair served as the confederate.

Procedure

At the beginning of the academic quarter, participants completed several questionnaires as part of a mass-testing session. One of the questionnaires asked whether participants were currently involved in a romantic relationship. Another questionnaire contained the trait list, which included a variety of traits (taken from Fletcher et al., 1999) such as “ambitious”, “generous”, “trustworthy”, “affectionate”, “broad-minded”, and “spontaneous”.¹ Participants were asked to select from the trait list (a) the three characteristics that were absolutely essential or most desirable

in an ideal romantic partner and (b) the three characteristics that were the least essential or least desirable in an ideal romantic partner.

Participants arrived for the experiment and were greeted by a same-sex experimenter in a small waiting area. An opposite-sex confederate walked into the waiting area approximately 30 seconds later, and the participant observed a verbal exchange between the confederate and experimenter verifying that the confederate was an additional participant for whom they were waiting. The experimenter then led the confederate and the participant to two separate rooms in the laboratory to complete the consent process.

The experimenter then explained that the participant would be interacting with a single (i.e., romantically unattached) participant whom the participant had seen arrive just moments ago (i.e., the confederate). The experimenter explained that during the interaction the participant should “try to imagine that you are on a short date with this person and you are trying to determine whether or not you would like this person as a romantic partner.” The experimenter then presented the participant with a sheet which, as the experimenter explained, contained the confederate’s selection of three traits that best described him/herself (referred to herein as the “profile”). The participant was also presented with the full trait list of 35 or 21 traits (see Footnote 2). In the ideal condition ($n = 53$), the confederate’s first and third traits were two of the three traits that the participant had selected as being the most essential in a romantic partner. In the nonideal condition ($n = 47$), the confederate’s first and third traits were two of the three traits that the participant had selected as being the least essential in a romantic partner. (The middle trait was always a random trait that was not listed by the participant as either most or least essential.) The confederate handwrote the traits on the profile before each experimental session but did not know whether the profile was the participant’s ideal or nonideal. The experimenter asked the participant to look over the profile for a minute and “imagine what he/she might be like.” After the minute had elapsed,

the experimenter returned, took the confederate's profile and the trait list, and gave the participant the first partner impression questionnaire.

Then, the experimenter brought the participant into another room where the confederate was seated at a small conference table. The experimenter motioned for the participant to sit across the table, facing the confederate. The participant and the confederate would each describe a set of 4 Thematic Apperception Test (TAT) pictures for one another; these pictures were face-down in front of the participant and the confederate on the table. The experimenter explained that they should not show the picture to the other participant but just "to describe it as objectively as you can" for 30 seconds. The experimenter instructed the participant and the confederate to take turns until they had described all 8 pictures, asked the confederate to go first, then left the room. The confederate had memorized a description for the 4 pictures (constant across all six confederates); these descriptions were designed to sound natural. The experimenter returned once all the pictures had been described and took the participant back to the other laboratory room. The experimenter then gave the participant the second partner impression questionnaire; after completing this questionnaire, the participant completed the ideal preferences questionnaire and was debriefed and thanked.²

Materials

Partner impression questionnaire. Participants completed eight items (taken from Eastwick & Finkel, 2008; Eastwick, Richeson, Finkel, & Son, 2009) on the partner impression questionnaire on two separate occasions: once after viewing the profile and once after interacting with the confederate. The eight post-interaction items were subjected to a factor analysis (principal axis factoring with promax rotation), and a one-factor solution was suggested by parallel analysis (Fabrigar, Wegener, MacCallum, & Strahan, 1999). Therefore, the main dependent variable *Romantic Interest* was the average of the eight items (e.g., "I really like my interaction partner," "I

would be interested in going on a date with my interaction partner”, “My interaction partner and I would probably have a real connection”). These items were answered on a 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 9 (*strongly agree*) scale ($\alpha = .88$; $M = 5.06$, $SD = 1.05$, Range = 2.1-7.6). The partner impression questionnaire that followed the profile also contained a manipulation check asking participants to recall the three traits that were written on the profile.

Ideal preferences questionnaire. Participants rated the extent to which the traits on the trait list described their ideal romantic partner on a scale from 1 (*not at all*) to 9 (*extremely*).

Results

We conducted a 2-way Ideal-Perceived Trait Match (Ideal vs. Nonideal) \times Assessment (Post-Profile vs. Post-Interaction) mixed model ANOVA on the dependent variable Romantic Interest; Ideal-Perceived Trait Match was a between-subjects factor and Assessment was a within-subjects factor. A dummy code for the male/female confederate/experimenter pair and the Dummy \times Assessment interaction were included as covariates in all analyses. Means for the dependent variable Romantic Interest are presented in Figure 1.

Neither the main effect of ideal-perceived trait match, $F(1,96) = 2.27$, $p = .135$, nor the main effect of assessment, $F(1,96) = 1.08$, $p = .302$, was significant. However, as hypothesized, the 2-way interaction was significant, $F(1,96) = 4.50$, $p = .036$. To examine the nature of this 2-way interaction, we examined the main effect of ideal-perceived trait match within each level of assessment. At the first assessment, when participants had seen only the profile, there was a significant effect of ideal-perceived trait match condition on Romantic Interest, $F(1,96) = 11.05$, $p = .001$: Participants were more romantically interested in the ideal than the nonideal confederate after seeing the profile. However, the effect of ideal-perceived trait match on Romantic Interest was nonsignificant at the second assessment, $F(1,96) = 0.11$, $p = .746$: After the live interaction, participants no longer discriminated between the ideal and the nonideal confederate. These

findings are consistent with the possibility that interacting with a potential romantic partner interferes with the effect of the ideal-perceived trait match on participants' romantic interest in a potential partner.

Within the ideal condition alone, the effect of assessment was nonsignificantly negative, $F(1,96) = 0.63, p = .429$, but within the nonideal condition, this effect was significantly positive, $F(1,96) = 4.66, p = .033$. In other words, the reason that the ideal-perceived trait match manipulation did not predict Romantic Interest at the post-interaction assessment was largely because participants in the nonideal condition boosted their Romantic Interest ratings of the confederate. In a model that included the 3-way interaction with participant sex (Ideal-Perceived Trait Match \times Assessment \times Sex) and all lower-order terms, no significant terms involving sex emerged.

On the ideal preferences questionnaire, participants rated the extent to which a series of traits characterized their ideal romantic partner. Participants' Ideal Score was calculated as the average of the two traits that had been listed by the participant at the mass-testing session as most essential (ideal condition) or least essential (nonideal condition) in a romantic partner and that appeared on the profile. These two traits had effectively been the source of the manipulation; indeed, the effect of ideal-perceived trait match condition on Ideal Score was highly significant, $M_{\text{Ideal}} = 8.27, M_{\text{Nonideal}} = 5.77, F(1,95) = 131.85, p < .001$. Importantly, Ideal Score correlated with Romantic Interest at the post-profile assessment, $r(95) = .35, p < .001$, but not at the post-interaction assessment, $r(95) = .08, p = .430$. This finding is consistent with the hypothesis that participants' ideals for the profile traits were relevant to their evaluations of the confederate after viewing the profile but not after the live interaction.

It is possible that the ideal-perceived trait match condition no longer predicted participants' Romantic Interest after the live interaction because they became less confident that the contents of

the profile accurately described the confederate. Both the first and second partner impression questionnaires completed by the final set of 39 participants (see Footnote 2) contained the item “The 3 characteristics chosen by my interaction partner are probably accurate in describing him/her?”. However, participants’ reports on this Trait Accuracy item were virtually identical for the post-profile and post-interaction assessments, $M_{Assess1} = 6.10$, $M_{Assess2} = 5.97$, $t(38) = 0.45$, $p = .655$. This finding does not support the suggestion that the interaction caused participants to distrust the information they had seen on the profile.

Discussion

Study 1 marked an initial attempt to examine how the match between one’s ideals and the characteristics of a potential romantic partner affects romantic interest in an experimental context. In this study, the experimenter generated a short profile that made the confederate appear as though he or she either matched or mismatched the participant’s ideal. Indeed, participants did express more romantic interest in the ideal relative to the nonideal confederate immediately after viewing the profile, suggesting that participants comprehended this manipulation and that it influenced romantic interest in this indirect context as expected. However, when the participant had a live interaction with the confederate moments later, the ideal/nonideal manipulation ceased to influence the participant’s romantic interest; that is, participants then appeared to desire the ideal and nonideal confederate equally. Having an interaction with a potential romantic partner thus interfered with the effect of the ideal-perceived trait match on participants’ romantic interest. In attraction settings, the extent to which a potential romantic partner matches one’s ideals may better predict relationship initiation processes in indirect contexts (e.g., a dating profile) than direct ones (e.g., a live interaction). This effect is consistent with prior studies revealing that general trait constructs, like those for which researchers typically assess ideal partner preferences, better predict participants’ evaluations of abstract rather than concrete targets (Nussbaum et al., 2003).

Given that people are adept social perceivers (Ambady & Rosenthal, 1993), participants presumably gleaned additional trait information from their interaction with the confederate despite the heavily constrained nature of the experimental situation.³ But this new information did not cause participants to doubt the validity of the profile traits, as evidenced by participants' beliefs that the manipulated ideal/nonideal traits accurately described the confederate both before and after the interaction. Nevertheless, the fact that the simple effect of assessment (post-profile vs. post-interaction) significantly changed in the nonideal (but not ideal) condition raises a possible alternative explanation. In the ideal condition, participants likely compared the profile traits with their ideals after viewing the profile, and any new positive information they gathered about the confederate in the live interaction (i.e., that she can speak well, etc.) did not challenge this initially positive impression. However, perhaps participants in the nonideal condition were no longer affected by the ideal manipulation after the live interaction because the information contained on the profile was overshadowed by the new, positive information about the confederate that was acquired during the interaction. After all, participants in the nonideal condition probably considered the profile traits to be more or less neutral: The traits were not negative and did not represent participants' "anti-ideals" (e.g., neuroticism; Figueredo et al., 2006), nor did these traits clearly imply that the confederate lacked the participants' ideal traits.⁴ According to this alternative explanation, the new positive information acquired during the interaction made these neutral profile traits irrelevant.

In an attempt to address this possibility, we examined negative (i.e., "anti-ideals") as well as positive traits in Studies 2 and 3. If the Study 1 participants in the nonideal condition were able to overlook the profile traits because those traits were neutral or mildly positive, then the ideal-perceived trait match manipulation should produce a significant effect on romantic interest after the live interaction if the profile contains strongly disliked traits in the nonideal condition. That is,

it should be more difficult for new, positive information gleaned during a minimal interaction to overwhelm negative and undesirable profile traits (e.g., indecisive, easily upset) if indeed ideals serve as a standard that people use to make judgments of romantic interest. Alternatively, if the ideal-perceived trait match does not influence participants' romantic interest judgments once a live interaction has taken place, as we have hypothesized, then a profile that incorporates negative traits should produce the same interaction pattern as Study 1.

STUDY 2

Study 2 tested two possible explanations for why participants' romantic interest judgments in Study 1 were affected by the ideal-perceived trait match manipulation after meeting a potential partner "on paper" but not after having a live interaction. As the following paragraphs explain, one possibility is that participants might have altered the degree to which the profile traits were characteristic of their ideal romantic partner after meeting the confederate, and the second is that participants might have altered their interpretation of the meaning of the profile traits after meeting the confederate.

Changing Ideal Partner Preferences

In principle, participants could have changed what traits they valued in an ideal romantic partner after the live interaction with the confederate. For example, imagine that a participant had listed "spontaneous" and "ambitious" as being least essential in an ideal romantic partner and that the participant had seen the traits "spontaneous", "affectionate", and "ambitious" on the profile (i.e., the participant is in the nonideal condition). Presumably, the participant would have provided a low rating of romantic interest in the confederate after viewing the profile. Then imagine that the confederate makes a relatively positive impression on the participant during the live interaction. Now, the participant may think that it is not so bad that the confederate described him/herself as

“spontaneous” and “ambitious”. As a consequence, the participant could elevate the desirability of these traits in an ideal romantic partner.

Although ideal partner preferences could be malleable in theory, only recently have studies examined momentary changes in the qualities that participants desire in an ideal romantic partner. As one example, participants who were experimentally assigned to consider a future in which they were their family’s primary wage-earner placed more importance on a younger mate with cooking and housekeeping skills and less importance on financial prospects in a mate relative to participants who were experimentally assigned to consider themselves playing a domestic role (Eagly et al., 2009). Another study found that men were more likely to report that their ideal romantic partner was underweight to the extent that they were not currently hungry and not feeling poor (Nelson & Morrison, 2005). To test whether the brief laboratory interaction in Study 1 altered participants’ ideal partner preferences, in Study 2 we assessed ideal preferences both after the profile and after the live interaction.

Changing the Meaning of a Partner’s Traits

A second possible explanation for the Study 1 findings is that the live interaction with the confederate could have changed the meaning of the traits that were presented on the profile. This hypothesis follows from Asch’s (1946) classic theoretical perspective on person perception. Asch’s approach emphasized that a target’s traits collectively form a particular structure and that one’s impression of a target emerges from the organization of the full constellation of traits. Asch (1946) found that participants could quickly integrate a variety of different characteristics about a target individual and then verbally describe this coherent, unified impression. Asch asserted that “the characteristics forming the basis of an impression do not contribute each a fixed, independent meaning” (p. 268); rather, participants’ interpretation of a target’s traits shift depending on the overall structure of which they are a part. One concrete empirical prediction that derives from this

perspective is the *change of meaning hypothesis*, which suggests that participants will shift the connotative meaning of an attribute to be congruent with their overall impression of an individual. In one demonstration of this process, Hamilton and Zanna (1974) found that participants indeed shifted the meaning of a target's traits depending on their impression of that target. For example, when the target individual had positive traits overall, participants rated the target's attribute "proud" as being close in meaning to "confident", whereas when the target individual had negative traits overall, participants rated "proud" as being close in meaning to "conceited".

In the present study, we examined whether participants similarly shifted the meaning of the traits that described the confederate. When traits are presented clearly and unambiguously in simple experimental stimuli (e.g., a romantic target's profile, photographs, written descriptions), there is little additional context to the target, and the comparison between a trait and one's ideals may be fairly straightforward.⁵ However, a live interaction might convey additional information that contextualizes each trait and impedes this comparison process (Reis, Maniaci, Caprariello, Eastwick, & Finkel, in press). We hypothesized that ideals may not predict romantic interest after a live interaction because the meanings of the profile traits change in the wake of the interaction and are therefore no longer directly comparable with the participant's ideals as reported before the experiment. Participants' estimates of the meaning of the profile traits (as these traits applied to the confederate) were assessed after the participant viewed the profile and again after the live interaction. If the live interaction provides a broader structure or context for interpreting the confederate's traits, then participants' ratings of the meaning of the profile traits will shift to be in line with their overall impression of the confederate. Therefore, the connotative meaning (i.e., positivity) ascribed to the profile traits should show a pattern that is similar to the dependent measure of Romantic Interest: Participants should report that the ideal traits have a more positive

meaning than the nonideal traits after viewing the profile, and this difference should be smaller after the live interaction.

Method

Participants

Participants were 107 Northwestern University undergraduates who completed the experiment as part of a course requirement. Sixteen participants were excluded from analyses (as in Study 1) for failing the manipulation check, and one participant was excluded because she reported that she knew the confederate beforehand. (In this study, none identified as gay or lesbian as assessed by the item used in Study 1.) The remaining 90 participants (42 men, 48 women) were 18.6 years old on average ($SD=0.7$ years); the racial/ethnic breakdown was 1% Arab-American, 30% Asian-American, 57% Caucasian, 7% Hispanic, and 5% other. As in Study 1, all participants reported that they were single at a mass-testing session early in the academic quarter. This study used two sets of confederate pairs.

Procedure

The Study 2 procedure was identical to Study 1 except for two changes. First, at the beginning-of-term mass-testing session, participants reported how well 12 traits described their ideal romantic partner on a scale from -4 (*highly uncharacteristic*) to 4 (*highly characteristic*). To make a direct parallel with prior research on the change of meaning hypothesis, we used the 12 traits assessed by Hamilton and Zanna (1974). They classified four as moderately likeable (proud, daring, satirical, persistent), four as neutral (excitable, outspoken, perfectionistic, and self-contented), and four as moderately undesirable (undecided, conforming, clownish, crafty). At the experimental session, the profile viewed by the participant contained these three sets of four traits, and the confederate had ostensibly circled which trait out of each set of four traits best described him/her (e.g., the confederate might have circled daring, perfectionistic, and conforming). In the

ideal condition, the three traits circled on the profile were the traits in each set of four that the participant had indicated best described his/her ideal romantic partner at the mass-testing session. In the nonideal condition, the three circled traits were the traits that the participant desired the least in an ideal romantic partner. Ties for the favorite or least favorite trait in each set of four were broken randomly.⁶ The second change from Study 1 was that the experimenter administered the preferences and traits questionnaire after administering each partner impression questionnaire.

Materials

The partner impression questionnaire was identical to the one used in Study 2 (Romantic Interest $\alpha = .89$; $M = 5.28$, $SD = 1.01$, Range = 2.8-8.1). The preferences and traits questionnaire assessed two potential mediators: ideal partner preferences and trait meaning. The 12 ideal partner preferences were assessed in the same manner as at the mass-testing session; analyses were conducted on the average of the three ideal partner preferences that corresponded to the three traits circled on the profile (average interitem $r = .55$). Trait meaning was assessed in a manner similar to that used by Hamilton and Zanna (1974); participants provided ratings that indicated a positive versus negative interpretation of each of the profile traits. For example, if the trait “daring” had been circled on the profile, the participant would have read the following: “The other participant reported that the trait daring was characteristic of him/her. Do you personally think this means that the other participant is reckless or that he/she is courageous?” The participant would then have circled a number from -4 (*reckless*) to 4 (*courageous*). Participants completed this item for the three traits circled on the profile (average interitem $r = .35$). The trait meaning anchors were identical to those selected by Hamilton and Zanna (1974) and are presented in Table 1: Hamilton and Zanna ensured that all the positive anchors were more positive than the four moderately likeable profile traits and that all the negative anchors were more negative than the four

moderately undesirable profile traits. The order in which these two mediators (ideal partner preferences and trait meaning) were presented was counterbalanced.

Results

Study 1 Replication

As in Study 1, we conducted a 2-way Ideal-Perceived Trait Match (Ideal vs. Nonideal) \times Assessment (Post-Profile vs. Post-Interaction) mixed model ANOVA on the dependent variable Romantic Interest; Ideal-Perceived Trait Match was a between-subjects factor and Assessment was a within-subjects factor. As in Study 1, a dummy code for the male/female confederate/experimenter pair and the Dummy \times Assessment interaction were entered as covariates for all analyses reported below. Means for Romantic Interest are presented in Figure 2, Panel A; in general, the pattern of means was similar to that found in Study 1. The main effect of ideal-perceived trait match was not quite significant, $F(1,87) = 2.75, p = .108$, but the main effect of assessment was significant, $F(1,88) = 8.46, p = .005$, which indicates that participants overall expressed more Romantic Interest in the confederate after the live interaction than after viewing the profile. Most importantly, a significant Ideal-Perceived Trait Match \times Assessment interaction emerged, $F(1,87) = 4.72, p = .032$. As in Study 1, participants reported more Romantic Interest in the ideal than the nonideal confederate after seeing the profile, $F(1,87) = 12.92, p = .001$, but participants' Romantic Interest ratings did not differ between the ideal and the nonideal conditions after the live interaction, $F(1,87) = 0.27, p = .605$.

Also as in Study 1, the effect of assessment was nonsignificant in the ideal condition, $F(1,87) = 0.04, p = .842$, but was significant and positive in the nonideal condition, $F(1,87) = 4.55, p = .036$. In a model that included the 3-way interaction with participant sex (Ideal-Perceived Trait Match \times Assessment \times Sex) and all lower-order terms, the only significant term involving sex was the main effect; women were more romantically interested in the confederate than men,

$M_{\text{Men}} = 5.09$, $M_{\text{Women}} = 5.48$, $F(1,85) = 4.99$, $p = .028$. Also, as in Study 1, participants' perceptions of the accuracy of the profile traits were virtually identical for the first and second assessment, $M_{\text{Assess1}} = 5.18$, $M_{\text{Assess2}} = 5.14$, $t(89) = 0.17$, $p = .869$.

Two Potential Mediators

If either ideal partner preferences or trait meaning were similarly predicted by the Ideal-Perceived Trait Match \times Assessment interaction, then those constructs could potentially serve as mediators of the romantic interest effect documented in the current study and in Study 1. To test these possibilities, we first conducted a 2-way Ideal-Perceived Trait Match (Ideal vs. Nonideal) \times Assessment (Post-Profile vs. Post-Interaction) mixed model ANOVA on the potential mediator ideal partner preferences; means are presented in Figure 2, Panel B. A significant interaction would indicate that the difference in the extent to which the profile traits characterized participants' ideal romantic partner in the ideal versus nonideal condition differed depending on whether they rated their ideal partner preferences after viewing the profile versus after interacting with the confederate. This analysis revealed a significant main effect of ideal-perceived trait match, $F(1,80) = 35.57$, $p < .001$, indicating that the profile traits were more characteristic of participants' ideal romantic partner in the ideal than the nonideal condition. In addition, a marginal main effect of assessment emerged, $F(1,80) = 3.33$, $p = .072$, suggesting that participants decreased their ideal partner preference ratings after the live interaction. Most importantly, the Ideal-Perceived Trait Match \times Assessment interaction did not approach significance, $F(1,80) = 0.85$, $p = .359$, indicating that the difference between the ideal and nonideal condition in participants' ratings of the desirability of the profile traits in an ideal romantic partner did not differ across the two assessments. Indeed, the simple effect of ideal-perceived trait match was strong and significant at both the first, $F(1,80) = 236.50$, $p < .001$, and second, $F(1,80) = 169.21$, p

< .001, assessments. Therefore, ideal partner preferences were not likely to have mediated the effect of the Ideal-Perceived Trait Match \times Assessment interaction on Romantic Interest.

Second, we conducted the same mixed model ANOVA on the potential mediator trait meaning (i.e., the positive versus negative interpretation of each trait); means are presented in Figure 2, Panel C. A significant interaction would indicate that participants' interpretations of the meaning of the profile traits in the ideal versus nonideal condition differed depending on whether they provided their ratings after viewing the profile versus after interacting with the confederate. This analysis revealed a significant main effect of ideal-perceived trait match, $F(1,87) = 4.96, p = .029$, indicating that participants interpreted the ideal confederate's traits more positively than the nonideal confederate's traits. In addition, this analysis revealed a significant main effect of assessment, $F(1,87) = 19.96, p < .001$, such that participants interpreted the confederate's traits to be more positive after the interaction than after viewing the profile. Most importantly, the Ideal-Perceived Trait Match \times Assessment interaction was significant, $F(1,87) = 6.10, p = .015$. As predicted, the participants rated the traits as having a more positive meaning in the ideal than the nonideal condition after viewing the profile, $F(1,87) = 15.30, p < .001$. However, after the interaction, this difference was no longer significant, $F(1,87) = 0.18, p = .676$.

This trait meaning interaction has approximately the same form as the interaction on the dependent variable Romantic Interest. Therefore, it is possible that participants expressed more romantic interest for the ideal than the nonideal confederate after viewing the profile but not after the live interaction *because* their interpretation of the meaning of the confederate's traits changed in the wake of the interaction. To test this mediated moderation hypothesis, we first constructed a dataset that contained two rows for each participant, one corresponding to the post-profile assessment (Assess = 0) and one corresponding to the post-interaction assessment (Assess = 1). (The intercept was permitted to vary randomly in this multilevel mediational analysis.) In this new

dataset, the ideal-perceived trait match (coded Ideal = 0, Nonideal = 1) \times Assessment interaction was again significant predicting trait meaning, $B = .68$, $t(87) = 2.53$, $p = .013$. In addition, in a multilevel regression predicting Romantic Interest from trait meaning (standardized such that $M = 0$, $SD = 1$), Ideal-Perceived Trait Match, Assessment, and the Ideal-Perceived Trait Match \times Assessment interaction, the effect of trait meaning was significant, $B = .37$, $t(86) = 5.24$, $p < .001$, whereas the Ideal-Perceived Trait Match \times Assessment interaction was not significant, $B = .22$, $t(86) = 1.31$, $p = .192$. (The effect of the Ideal-Perceived Trait Match \times Assessment interaction without trait meaning in the equation was significant, $B = .43$, $t[87] = 2.32$, $p = .023$.) A mediational test (Baron & Kenny, 1986) indicated that the inclusion of trait meaning in the equation significantly reduced the effect of the Ideal-Perceived Trait Match \times Assessment interaction on Romantic Interest, Sobel $z = 2.28$, $p = .023$.

This analysis provides suggestive evidence that participants experienced more desire for the ideal than the nonideal confederate after viewing the profile because they interpreted the meaning of the confederate's traits to be consistent with their ideals. However, participants did not express more romantic interest in the ideal than the nonideal confederate after the live interaction because they interpreted the meaning of the profile traits to be similarly positive in the two conditions. In summary, the results for the potential mediators suggested that, after the live interaction, participants did not change the extent to which the profile traits characterized their ideal romantic partner; rather, they reinterpreted what it meant for the confederate to possess those traits.

Discussion

Why did participants in Study 1 express more romantic interest in the ideal than the nonideal confederate after viewing the confederate's traits on paper but not after meeting the confederate in person? Study 2 explored two possible explanations for this pattern. One possibility

is that participants' ideals actually changed between the time when they rated their attraction to the confederate described in the profile and the time that they rated their attraction to the live confederate. However, the present study found no evidence for this hypothesis. Participants did place more emphasis on the ideal than the nonideal profile traits overall; this main effect makes sense given that the ideal partner preferences for the profile traits from an earlier mass-testing session determined which traits served as the ideal versus nonideal manipulation. However, the difference in ideal partner preferences between the ideal and nonideal condition did not change between the two assessments in the experimental session.

A second possibility is that the connotative meaning of the profile traits changed between the time participants rated their attraction to the profile and the time they rated their attraction to the live confederate. In other words, perhaps participants' interpretations of the profile traits were consistent with their ideals after viewing the profile (i.e., the ideal traits had more positive connotations than the nonideal traits), but their interpretations of the traits changed to become more similar across the ideal and nonideal conditions after meeting the confederate. Study 2 provided support for this hypothesis. Participants did indeed ascribe more positive meanings to the profile traits in the ideal than the nonideal condition after viewing the profile, but the live interaction caused participants to shift the meaning of the profile traits to become more similar in the two conditions (similarly positive in this case). This finding is reminiscent of other change of meaning effects that reflect contextualized person perception processes (Asch, 1946; Hamilton & Zanna, 1974): The meaning of a personality trait frequently varies depending on a target individual's overall constellation of attributes. The present findings are consistent with the possibility that the live interaction, despite its simplicity and brevity, provided participants with a broader context for understanding the confederate and led them to reinterpret the profile traits to fit this overall impression. Therefore, the ideal-perceived trait match manipulation failed to exert a

significant effect on romantic interest at the second assessment because the traits for which participants reported their ideals and the traits as applied to the confederate no longer meant the same thing. Metaphorically speaking, a potential partner's traits may be like moving targets, and in live attraction contexts, ideal partner preferences may have difficulty hitting that target on average.

A limitation of Studies 1 and 2 is that they examined only relationship initiation, not the maintenance of a current relationship. Although many of the factors that affect romantic decisions should apply to both relationship initiation and maintenance contexts (e.g., the partner's positive vs. negative qualities, sharing common interests and goals), there are clearly differences as well. For example, costs tend to increase as a relationship evolves (Eidelson, 1981), and with the additional interdependence that comes with couplehood in the contemporary United States, romantic partners will typically encounter choice points that force them to make sacrifices on behalf of each other (Gagné & Lydon, 2004). Thus, people may become motivated to compare a current partner with their ideals to ensure that he or she is a good long-term match. Therefore, the findings documented above may be characteristic only of potential or developing romantic relationships; ideal partner preferences could instead serve a function in romantic relationships after the relationship initiation stage, potentially influencing participants' decisions to remain involved with or increase commitment toward a romantic partner. This is a topic that Study 3 addresses.

STUDY 3

Study 3 tested the predictive validity of the ideal-perceived trait match across a different pair of contexts: having versus not having a relationship with a romantic partner. Research by Fletcher and colleagues suggests that the match between ideals and the characteristics of a romantic partner predicts relationship outcomes among individuals who are involved in a romantic

relationship (Fletcher et al., 2000; Fletcher et al., 1999). We anticipated that we would replicate this finding, but also that the ideal-perceived trait match would not predict outcomes when people are reporting on potential romantic partners with whom they are not yet romantically involved. That is, relationship status might moderate the predictive validity of the ideal-perceived trait match.

This study will also attempt to rule out a possible alternative explanation for the findings of Fletcher and colleagues: It is possible that ideals demonstrated predictive validity in that work because these researchers assessed participants' ideals after they had already been involved in a relationship with their partner. Therefore, the pattern of results could indicate that participants in satisfying relationships shifted their ideals to conform to the characteristics of their current partner; indeed, participants' ideals did change on average to become more similar to the positive characteristics of their current partner (Fletcher et al., 2000). To address this possibility, in Study 3 we assumed the challenging task of assessing participants' ideals before they became involved in a romantic relationship to examine the extent to which ideals carry forward into the future and predict outcomes in a new relationship.

In this study, we assessed ideal partner preferences and partner characteristics using rating scales. These ratings provide two conceptually independent sources of variance that could conceivably predict relational outcomes (Cronbach, 1955). The first is the overall *level* of the response for each item and the second is the *pattern* of the responses across items. To test the predictive validity of the level of participants' responses, we examined whether the Ideal Preference \times Partner Characteristic interaction was a significant and positive predictor of each dependent variable (hereafter referred to as the Level Metric). This interaction tests whether the slope of the regression line predicting a dependent variable (e.g., passion) from a partner characteristic is more positive for individuals with high relative to low ideal ratings for that

characteristic. Alternatively, to test the predictive validity of the pattern of participants' responses, we examined whether the within-person correlation between ideals and a partner's traits across all traits was a significant and positive predictor of each dependent variable (hereafter referred to as the Pattern Metric). This technique assesses whether the match between the *relative* importance of a participant's ideals and the *relative* presence of a partner's traits predicts each dependent variable. Both sources of variance have been the subject of prior research; for example, the level of participants' responses to ideal partner preference items was of considerable interest to scholars examining sex differences in the preference for particular traits (e.g., physical attractiveness, earning prospects; Buss, 1989). However, Fletcher and colleagues documented predictive validity evidence using the Pattern Metric (Fletcher et al., 1999, 2000) but not the Level Metric (Fletcher et al., 1999, footnote 7). Therefore, it was critical that we test the predictive validity of the ideal-perceived trait match using both techniques in this study.

In addition, we assessed three different variables that could potentially moderate the predictive validity of the ideal-perceived trait match. Eastwick and Finkel (2008) focused on the short-term versus long-term mating strategy distinction (Buss & Schmitt, 1993) but did not find that variation in the use of these strategies was related to the predictive effects of the ideal-perceived trait match. In the present study, we examined other potential moderators: specifically, whether participants who (a) were higher in self-perceived mate value (see also Eastwick & Finkel, 2008), (b) strongly endorsed the Pragma "shopping list" love style (Hendrick & Hendrick, 1986), or (c) had known the target of their attraction for a longer period of time were more likely to endorse the dependent variables (e.g., passion) with targets who approximated their ideals.

This study was conducted in collaboration with a national company that offers live speed-dating events as well as online dating. Individuals who signed up to participate in speed-dating events with this company were invited to complete an optional online questionnaire assessing

ideal partner preferences. Approximately 27 months after participants completed this initial questionnaire, we followed up with them to assess their current relationship status. Participants who were involved in a relationship at this follow-up assessment completed several dependent measures about the status of their current relationship as well as the characteristics of their current partner. Participants who were single at this second time point completed many of these same items about their most desired romantic partner. Therefore, these data permit a test of whether relationship status (single vs. in a relationship) significantly moderated the predictive effects of the ideal-perceived trait match. If ideal preferences serve a function in established relationships, then participants' ideals should better predict relationship outcomes for participants who reported on a current romantic partner relative to those who reported on a desired, but not current, romantic partner.⁷

Method

Participants

The central analyses reported in the Results section were conducted on a sample of 502 participants. These participants completed an optional online questionnaire (the preferences questionnaire) after signing up with a national speed-dating company to participate in a live speed-dating event held in any of a variety of cities throughout the United States. Approximately 27 months later, they completed a second optional online survey (the follow-up questionnaire). As an incentive to complete this second survey, participants were given personalized feedback about their responses to some of the items on the preferences questionnaire at the completion of the follow-up questionnaire.⁸

When the participants completed the follow-up questionnaire, they were 40.9 years old on average ($SD = 9.5$ years, range = 24-69 years). In addition, 281 (56%) reported that they were currently involved in a romantic relationship, with 16% of this subsample describing their

relationship as “dating casually”, 56% as “dating seriously”, 15% as “engaged”, and 13% as “married”. The average relationship length for participants currently involved in a romantic relationship was 13.2 months. The racial/ethnic breakdown was 4% African-American, 3% Asian-American, 86% Caucasian, 3% Hispanic, 4% bi-racial, and less than 1% other.

Procedure

A link to the optional preferences questionnaire appeared on the payment confirmation page after participants signed up for a speed-dating event with a national speed-dating company. The questionnaire took approximately 15 minutes to complete. All participants who completed the preferences questionnaire received an email from the same national speed-dating company approximately 26.7 months later ($SD = 3.6$). This email invited the participants to a website to complete the follow-up questionnaire, which also took approximately 15 minutes to complete.

Materials

Ideal partner preferences. On the preferences questionnaire, participants reported the importance of 48 characteristics in a romantic partner on a scale from -4 (highly undesirable) to 4 (highly desirable). As in Study 1, these items were drawn from Fletcher et al. (1999), and they were supplemented by additional items from the Big 5 (e.g., easily upset; Gosling, Rentfrow, & Swann, 2003), the interpersonal circumplex (e.g., submissive; Wiggins, Trapnell, & Phillips, 1988), and the broader relationships literature (e.g., politically liberal; Watson et al., 2004) that were less normatively positive. Responses to these items provided by 618 participants (see Footnote 8) were subjected to a factor analysis (principal axis factoring with promax rotation). A 7-factor solution was suggested by a parallel analysis. The constructs were *Physically Attractive* (4 items; e.g., “attractive”, “sexy”; $\alpha = .82$), *Good Earning Prospects* (10 items; e.g., “financially secure”, “successful”; $\alpha = .87$), *Warm* (12 items; e.g., “supportive”, “kind”; $\alpha = .90$), *Exciting* (7 items; e.g., “adventurous”, “fun”; $\alpha = .80$), *Unpleasant* (5 items; e.g., “demanding”, “easily

upset”; $\alpha = .64$), *Meek* (3 items; e.g., “passive”, “submissive”; $\alpha = .67$), and *Conservative* (3 items; e.g., “conventional”, “politically liberal” [reverse-scored]; $\alpha = .54$). To be included in a construct, the item had to (a) have a better loading on that construct than on the other constructs, (b) load greater than .3, and (c) have a positive item-total correlation with the construct. The items “socially distant”, “disorganized”, “humorous”, and “calm” were excluded using these criteria.

Partner characteristics. On the follow-up questionnaire, participants reported whether they were currently involved in a romantic relationship. Participants who answered “yes” then reported the initials of their current romantic partner, whereas participants who answered “no” reported the initials of the person with whom they would most desire to have a romantic relationship. Participants reporting on a current romantic partner and participants reporting on a desired romantic partner had known the person for over two years on average, $M_{Single} = 44.0$ months, $SD = 83.8$; $M_{Relationship} = 27.4$ months, $SD = 53.8$. Later in the questionnaire, they indicated on a scale from -4 (highly uncharacteristic) to 4 (highly characteristic) how well each of the 48 ideal partner characteristics assessed on the preferences questionnaire described the person whose initials they reported earlier. These items were averaged to create scales identical to the Ideal Partner Preference scales that assessed Physically Attractive ($\alpha = .81$), Good Earning Prospects ($\alpha = .87$), Warm ($\alpha = .92$), Exciting ($\alpha = .83$), Unpleasant ($\alpha = .81$), Meek ($\alpha = .64$), and Conservative ($\alpha = .50$) characteristics of participants’ current or most desired romantic partners.

For participants currently involved in a romantic relationship, we wanted to ensure that their Ideal Partner Preference reports would not be contaminated by the strengths and weaknesses of their current partners, a process demonstrated by Fletcher and colleagues (2000). Using participants’ reported relationship length on the follow-up questionnaire, we determined that 33 participants had been dating the same partner when they completed the preferences questionnaire. These participants were omitted from all analyses reported in the Results section.

Romantic interest dependent variables. There were seven romantic interest dependent variables employed in this study, all of which were completed using 1-9 agreement scales (except for Marital Status). Three were completed by all participants regarding their current or most desired romantic partner: a 3-item measure of *Passion* (“I feel a great deal of sexual desire for _____”, “_____ is the only person I want to be romantically involved with”, “_____ always seems to be on my mind”; Eastwick & Finkel, 2008; $\alpha = .75$), a 4-item measure of *Bondedness* (“It is important to me to see or talk with _____ regularly”, “_____ is the first person that I would turn to if I had a problem”, “If I achieved something good, _____ is the person that I would tell first”, “When I am away from _____, I feel down”; Tancredy & Fraley, 2006; $\alpha = .84$), and a 2-item measure of *Desirability of Alternatives* (“The people other than _____ with whom I might become involved are very appealing”, “If I weren't dating _____, I would do fine – I would find another appealing person to date”; Rusbult, Martz, & Agnew, 1998; $\alpha = .46$). Three additional dependent variables were relevant only to participants who were currently involved in a relationship: a 2-item measure of *Relationship Satisfaction* (“I feel satisfied with my relationship with _____”, “My relationship with _____ is close to ideal”; Rusbult et al., 1998; $\alpha = .90$), a 2-item measure of *Commitment* (“I am committed to maintaining my relationship with _____”, “I want my relationship with _____ to last a very long time”; Rusbult et al., 1998; $\alpha = .94$), and, if participants were not engaged or married to their current partner, a 3-item measure of *Marriage Intentions* (“For me, _____ is exactly the kind of person I would like to marry”, “I intend to marry _____”, “If _____ were to ask me to marry him/her tomorrow, I would say ‘yes’”; $\alpha = .88$). Finally, a seventh dependent variable was *Marital Status*, coded 1 = engaged or married, 0 = dating casually or dating seriously for participants currently involved in a romantic relationship. So that all dependent variables have conceptually the same

meaning (i.e., greater scores equal more romantic interest), desirability of alternatives was reverse scored in all analyses (see Appendix A for additional details).

Individual Difference Potential Moderators. Participants completed two different measures of mate value on the preferences questionnaire. One was an item assessing participants' self-perceptions of dating desirability ("I am a desirable dating partner"). The second measure of mate value consisted of participants' ratings of the extent to which the 48 ideal partner characteristics described themselves on -4 (*not at all characteristic of me*) to 4 (*highly characteristic of me*) scales (for a similar measure, see Kirsner, Figueredo, & Jacobs, 2003); these Self Characteristics items were averaged to create the same Physically Attractive ($\alpha = .79$), Good Earning Prospects ($\alpha = .79$), Warm ($\alpha = .88$), Exciting ($\alpha = .77$), Unpleasant ($\alpha = .66$), Meek ($\alpha = .65$), and Conservative ($\alpha = .52$) scales. In addition, we assessed the Pragma love style on the follow-up questionnaire using two items ("I would only pursue a serious romantic relationship with someone if I had concluded that he/she matches up with my ideas about a good life partner", "When I enter into a serious romantic relationship, I carefully consider whether his/her qualities match those that I desire in a romantic partner"; $\alpha = .71$).

Results

We examined the predictive validity hypothesis using the Level Metric: Does the match between the level of a participant's ideal partner preference and the level of an actual partner's characteristic on a discrete trait dimension predict any or all of the seven romantic interest dependent variables? In addition, we used the Pattern Metric: Does the match between the pattern of a participant's ideal partner preferences and the pattern of an actual partner's characteristics across an array of trait dimensions predict any or all of the seven dependent variables? Analyses were conducted separately for participants who were single and who were in a relationship, and we also tested for moderation by relationship status for the three romantic interest dependent

variables which were relevant to all participants (passion, bondedness, and desirability of alternatives).

Predictive Validity Hypothesis – Level Metric

We first explored the predictive validity hypothesis in a series of regression analyses that predicted each of the 7 dependent variables (passion, bondedness, desirability of alternatives, satisfaction, commitment, marriage intentions, and marital status) from each of the 7 ideal partner preferences (Physically Attractive, Good Earning Prospects, Warm, Exciting, Unpleasant, Meek, and Conservative), the corresponding partner characteristic, and their interaction. A significant and positive interaction term would indicate support for the hypothesis. We separately analyzed participants who were single (3 DVs \times 7 preferences = 21 analyses) and who were in a relationship (7 DVs \times 7 preferences = 49 analyses), giving a total of 70 regression analyses. For these analyses, the ideal partner preferences and the partner characteristics were standardized, and logistic regression was used for the dependent variable marital status.

For the main effect of the *partner characteristic*, the characteristics Physically Attractive, Good Earning Prospects, Warm, and Exciting positively predicted the romantic interest dependent variables; these main effects were significant and positive in 8 or 9 out of the 10 regression analyses per characteristic. In other words, and not surprisingly, the more strongly participants reported that their current or most desired romantic partner possessed these characteristics, the higher their ratings of the dependent variables (e.g., passion, bondedness, marriage intentions) regarding him or her.⁹ For the characteristics Unpleasant, Meek, and Conservative, these main effects were rarely significant (1-3 times out of 10 analyses per characteristic). In addition, significant negative main effects of *ideal partner preferences* emerged for Physical Attractiveness in 5 out of 10 cases: Participants with lower ideals for physical attractiveness reported greater levels of some of the romantic interest dependent variables. For the remaining 6 ideal partner

preference characteristics, these main effects were rarely significant (0-3 times out of 10 analyses per characteristic).

Importantly, the slopes of the regression lines tended not to vary significantly as a function of participants' ideal partner preferences (see Table 2). Of the 70 analyses, 2 interaction terms were significant and positive: Conservative predicting desirability of alternatives for participants in relationships, $t(270) = 2.27, p = .024$, and marital status, $Wald \chi^2 = 5.57, p = .018$. An additional 4 interaction terms were marginal and positive, and 1 interaction term was marginal and negative. Thus, the Level Metric test of the predictive validity hypothesis was not generally supported, as the number of significant interactions did not exceed what would be expected due to chance. Furthermore, the average beta for the interaction term across all analyses reported in Table 2 was a very small $\beta = .02$ ($\beta = .01$ for single participants, $\beta = .02$ for participants in relationships). However, it is potentially noteworthy that the supportive analyses tended to involve the characteristic Conservative for participants who were involved in a relationship (5 out of 7 regressions significant or marginal). In addition, only 4 of the 70 Ideal Partner Preference \times Partner Characteristic interactions in Table 2 were moderated by participant sex, a value again that did not exceed what would be expected due to chance.

The dependent variables passion, bondedness, and desirability of alternatives were relevant both to participants who were (coded = 1) and were not (coded = 0) involved in a romantic relationship (21 pairs of interactions, see Table 2). However, when the entire sample of single and coupled participants was analyzed simultaneously, this relationship status variable significantly moderated only 1 of the 21 Ideal Partner Preference \times Partner Characteristic interactions (Meek predicting desirability of alternatives). In other words, the Level Metric was no more or less likely to predict the romantic interest dependent variables depending on whether participants were or were not involved in a romantic relationship.

Predictive Validity Hypothesis – Pattern Metric

For each participant, we calculated the within-person correlation between his/her ratings of the 7 ideal partner preference construct scores and the 7 partner characteristic construct scores. This correlation was Fisher z transformed to produce a measure of Actual-Ideal Overall Correspondence that ranged from -0.74 to 3.54 ($M = 1.16$, $SD = .66$).

For single participants, the associations between the pattern metric and the three romantic interest dependent variables were nonsignificant (Table 3). However, the associations tended to be significant and positive for participants who were currently involved in a romantic relationship (6 out of 7 associations significant or marginal). In other words, participants were more likely to report passion, bondedness, undesirable alternatives, satisfaction, commitment, and marriage intentions regarding a partner to the extent that the partner's entire array of characteristics matched the participant's overall ideal partner preference template. None of these associations was moderated by participant sex.

We also explored relationship status as a moderator for the dependent variables passion, bondedness, and desirability of alternatives, just as with the Level Metric analyses above. The interaction term in a regression predicting these variables (in three separate analyses) from the Actual-Ideal Overall Correspondence measure, relationship status, and their interaction was significant for passion, $t(486) = 3.92$, $p < .001$, and desirability of alternatives, $t(486) = 2.91$, $p = .004$, and marginal for bondedness, $t(486) = 1.66$, $p = .097$. These results indicate that the correlation between the Actual-Ideal Overall Correspondence measure and the romantic interest dependent variables significantly differed depending on whether participants were or were not currently involved in a romantic relationship. The three-way Actual-Ideal Overall Correspondence measure \times Relationship Status \times Sex interaction was nonsignificant for all three dependent

variables. Overall, the predictive validity hypothesis was supported using the Pattern Metric, but only for participants currently involved in a romantic relationship.¹⁰

Potential Moderators. We tested whether three individual difference variables (dating desirability, self characteristics, and Pragma) and one characteristic of the relationship (time known) moderated the Level Metric Partner Characteristic \times Ideal Preference interactions and/or the Pattern Metric Actual-Ideal Overall Correspondence associations examined above. There were 80 moderational analyses for dating desirability (70 Partner Characteristic \times Ideal Preference interactions and 10 Actual-Ideal Overall Correspondence associations; see Tables 2 and 3), 80 moderational analyses for Pragma, and 80 moderational analyses for time known. For dating desirability, only 4 of these 80 3-way interactions were significant; for Pragma, only 2 were significant; and for time known, only 2 were significant. For the self characteristics, we examined whether each of the seven characteristics moderated the Partner Characteristic \times Ideal Preference interaction for that same characteristic (e.g., self ratings of physical attractiveness as a moderator of the interaction between the physical attractiveness ideal preference and the perception of the partner's physical attractiveness). Only 2 of these 70 3-way interactions were significant. (The average of all seven self characteristic factors had an extremely low alpha of .28, so it makes little conceptual sense to examine these self ratings as a moderator of the Pattern Metric analyses.) In sum, these moderator analyses revealed little evidence that participants with high self-reported mate value, stringent ideal standards (i.e., Pragma), or who had known their current/most desired partner for a long period of time rated those partners more positively on the romantic interest dependent variables to the extent that those partners approximated their ideals.

Discussion

Study 3 compared the functioning of ideal partner preferences among participants who reported on a current romantic partner versus a desired romantic partner with whom they did not

currently have a relationship. As in Studies 1 and 2 and in prior research on speed-dating (Eastwick & Finkel, 2008; Todd et al., 2007), the ideal-perceived trait match was not relevant to participants' evaluations of someone who was merely a desired, not a current, partner. That is, for the single participants in Study 3, the predictive validity hypothesis was not supported regardless of whether the ideal-perceived trait match was conceptualized as a match in level (i.e., the Partner Characteristic \times Ideal Preference interaction) or pattern (i.e., the within-person correlation of ideal and trait ratings across all traits). However, the predictive validity hypothesis was supported among individuals who were reporting on a current romantic partner when the ideal-perceived trait match was conceptualized as a match in pattern (but not in level). Specifically, the Pattern Metric analysis revealed that participants reported greater passion, bondedness, satisfaction, commitment, marriage intentions, and poorer desirability of alternatives regarding their current partner to the extent that their overall concept of an ideal partner matched their partner's overall pattern of traits. None of the findings was consistently moderated by mate value, the Pragma "shopping list" love style, or the length of time that participants had known the target of their attraction. In summary, this study suggests that the ideal-perceived trait match may predict relational evaluations when two conditions are met: (a) the match between a participant's ideals and a partner's characteristics is conceptualized as correspondence in the relative pattern across several traits and (b) participants report on a partner with whom they currently have a relationship. These two features also characterized the significant predictive effects documented by Fletcher and colleagues (1999, 2000); the current study extends these findings to demonstrate the predictive validity of the ideal-perceived trait match even when ideals are assessed before participants have begun dating their current partner.

General Discussion

For decades, researchers have studied the qualities that people desire in an ideal romantic partner (e.g., Coombs & Kenkel, 1966; Hill 1945). Presumably, these ideal partner preferences function as standards that affect people's judgments of actual people who are or have the potential to be romantic partners (Fletcher & Simpson, 2000), but very little prior research has examined this process outside of established romantic relationships. This report presented three studies exploring the extent to which individual differences in ideal partner preferences are implicated in relationship initiation and maintenance processes.

Studies 1 and 2 used a controlled experimental setting to examine whether the ideal-perceived trait match would predict participants' romantic desire for an opposite-sex confederate in both an indirect and direct context. After viewing a paper-based "profile" which contained three traits describing the confederate, participants tended to express more romantic interest in the confederate who possessed characteristics of the participant's ideal romantic partner than the confederate who possessed nonideal characteristics. However, after engaging in a live, structured interaction with the confederate, participants' romantic interest reports no longer differed across the ideal and nonideal conditions. In other words, the ideal-perceived trait match manipulation seemed to inform participants' judgments about a potential romantic partner when meeting that individual "on paper" (i.e., an indirect context) but not after a live interaction had taken place (i.e., a direct context).

Study 2 drew from classic models of person perception to provide suggestive evidence for the mechanism underlying this pattern. Participants in this study interpreted the connotative meaning of the profile traits to be consistent with their ideals (i.e., positive for ideals, negative for nonideals) after reading the profile, but the meaning of the profile traits shifted to become more similar (similarly positive in this case) after the live interaction. These data suggest that the ideal manipulation did not predict romantic desire after the live interaction because the traits for which

participants had reported their ideals and the traits as applied to the live confederate had different meanings. Therefore, idiosyncratic variation in ideals may not be implicated in the relationship initiation process because traits as they are exhibited by live potential partners are often moving targets; a trait's meaning depends on the overall constellation of traits, and therefore the process of comparing a trait in a potential partner with an abstract, decontextualized ideal is not straightforward.

Study 3 examined whether the ideal-perceived trait match predicted people's judgments of a partner with whom they did or did not have a relationship, and the results depended on both relationship status (current vs. desired) and the type of variation in participants' ideal partner preference ratings that was used to compute "match". When we examined the variance in the extent to which participants rated a particular trait as desirable or undesirable in an ideal partner (i.e., the Level Metric), the ideal-perceived trait match was irrelevant to participants' judgments of both current and desired relationship partners. For the average participant, appealing qualities such as physical attractiveness, earning prospects, and warm characteristics tended to positively predict the dependent variables (e.g., passion, satisfaction), whereas unpleasant or meek characteristics tended not to predict these variables. However, ideal partner preferences did not predict the strength of these associations, indicating that the ideal-perceived trait match in level (i.e., high ideals with high levels of a characteristic in a partner; low ideals with low levels of a characteristic in a partner) were not relevant to participants' judgments of the targets of their attraction. However, Study 3 did find evidence that variance in the *pattern* of participants' ideals may predict judgments about current, but not desired, relationship partners: To the extent that the relative level of participants' ideals across several traits matched the relative level of those same traits in a current romantic partner (i.e., the Pattern Metric), participants reported greater levels of the romantic interest dependent variables. This finding is consistent with the work of Fletcher and

colleagues (1999, 2000), who found that the Pattern Metric predicted relationship quality and dissolution among individuals who were in an established relationship.

Implications and Future Directions

Integration with Broader Theoretical Models. In these studies, we examined the predictive validity of ideal partner preferences across two different pairs of contexts. The first was the distinction between meeting a potential partner “on paper” versus in a live interaction (Studies 1 and 2), and the second was the distinction between evaluating a partner with whom participants did versus did not have a relationship (Study 3). Taken together, these contexts bear some similarity to classic stage models of relationship formation and maintenance, most notably Levinger and Snoek’s (1972) Intersection Model of Pair Relatedness (see also Huston & Levinger, 1978; Levinger, 1994). This model posits that potential partners move through three relationship levels or stages: Awareness, which entails unilateral impressions with no interaction; Surface Contact, which includes limited interaction and information sharing between two people; and Mutuality, which involves at least some degree of closeness and interdependence. Given the current findings, it is tempting to suggest that the ideal-perceived trait match affects evaluations of romantic partners at stage 1 (Awareness) and stage 3 (Mutuality) but not stage 2 (Surface Contact). That is, idiosyncratic variation in ideal partner preferences might predict evaluations of partners before an interaction has taken place (Awareness) or after interdependence has been established (Mutuality) but not when partners are first meeting and getting to know each other (Surface Contact). Although Levinger and Snoek (1972) likely envisioned that Surface Contact would better characterize acquaintances who had known each other for a few minutes (as in Studies 1 and 2) rather than potential partners who had known each other for months or years (as in Study 3), the nonsignificant predictive effects of the ideal-perceived trait match across both of these contexts suggests that they may share some important similarities despite their obvious

differences. Although speculative at this point, perhaps the key distinction between Surface Contact and Mutuality in the Levinger and Snoek (1972) model is not the amount of knowledge that people have about each other but whether or not their life choices affect each other. That is, perhaps strong interdependence, and not extensive interpersonal knowledge, is the sine qua non of being involved in a romantic relationship.

This pattern of findings across the three stages begs another question: Is there a single theoretical perspective that could explain why the ideal-perceived trait match predicts outcomes at the very early and the later stages of a relationship but not in the middle stage, as potential partners evaluate each other and try to decide whether they want to form a relationship? We think that Construal Level Theory (Trope & Liberman, 2003; 2010) offers one promising possibility. Above, we outlined the different predictions offered by Construal Level Theory with regard to indirect versus direct contexts: The ideal-perceived trait match should better predict evaluations in indirect contexts (i.e., the Awareness stage), where people tend to use high-level abstract modes of thought, rather than direct contexts (i.e., the Surface Contact stage), where people tend to use low-level, concrete modes of thought. Could Construal Level Theory also apply to the desired versus current partner distinction in Study 3? Perhaps as long as a relationship remains merely desired, people continue to approach that relationship using a lower-level construal, primarily evaluating how it feels to be with the potential partner in the “here and now”. But once a relationship has been formed and interdependence increases, the relationship takes on an abstract quality with especially strong relevance to the future, and thus people adopt a higher-level construal when evaluating that relationship. To be sure, the relevance of Construal Level Theory to these findings will require additional research; for example, traditional construal-level manipulations (e.g., a partner’s physical distance from the self; Rim, Uleman, & Trope, 2009) could alter how the ideal-perceived trait match affects evaluations of the partner.

Yet other theoretical models could conceivably predict a very different pattern than the one obtained in Studies 1 and 2. For example, behavioral confirmation perspectives (Snyder, 1992) might predict that participants' impressions of the live confederate would match the information presented on the profile, in which case the post-interaction ratings should have differed between the ideal and nonideal conditions. Several classic studies in which two naïve participants talk with each other indeed revealed such self-fulfilling prophecies (Berk & Anderson, 2000; Snyder, Tanke, & Berscheid, 1977). At this point, we can only speculate as to why these prior studies generated findings that differ from those reported in this manuscript. One possibility is that, despite the fact that these prior studies had several outstanding features, they did not allow participants to meet face-to-face. It is conceivable that the nonverbal components of an interaction have a large effect on people's perceptions of an interaction partner. In fact, some recent research has suggested that body movement alone, without any verbal or attractiveness cues, is sufficient to give independent judges a sense of rapport between two interaction partners (Place, Todd, & Penke, 2011). Future research might determine how and why the present findings differ from these classic behavioral confirmation effects.

Alternative Assessments of Ideal Partner Preferences. The current set of studies examined the predictive validity of a classic (e.g., Hill, 1945) psychological construct: how much do people desire particular traits in an ideal romantic partner? We examined whether these ideals would predict the most straightforward outcome that we could envision—namely, the extent to which traits in a romantic partner inspired participants to want to initiate and maintain a relationship with that partner. Indeed, this predictive validity hypothesis is a logical individual-differences extension of the classic, well-publicized research on sex differences in ideal partner preferences (e.g., Buss, 1989): If men say they desire physical attractiveness in a romantic partner more than women, then presumably a romantic partner's physical attractiveness should predict

men's romantic interest better than women's. However, results provided little evidence that ideals exhibited this predictive validity in live attraction contexts (Studies 1 and 2). Our Study 3 procedures allowed us to cleanly separate the level of participants' ideals from the pattern of ideals across traits, and the variance in pattern, but not level, was relevant to participants' evaluations of their current relationship partners. These findings are consistent with other approaches that have used the Pattern Metric (e.g., Fletcher et al., 1999; 2000) but not with approaches that emphasize the level of participants' ideals, which is the more common data-analytic approach in this literature (e.g., Buss, 1989).

To be clear, the current research does not suggest that people pursue potential romantic partners randomly in attraction contexts or that the information that people glean about potential partners is irrelevant to the romantic desire that they subsequently experience. For example, people experience romantic desire when they perceive similarity with potential partners and when potential partners desire them in return (Eastwick, Finkel, Mochon, & Ariely, 2007; Luo & Zhang, 2009; Montoya, Horton, & Kirchner, 2008). And potential partners may be physically attractive, ambitious, friendly, warm, exciting, and dependable—these are all appealing traits that inspire romantic desire on average. The present research casts doubt on the possibility that *the extent to which* traits such as physical attractiveness, earning prospects, or warmth inspires someone's romantic desire depends on whether that trait characterizes their ideal partner. But of course, romantic relationship formation will surely not be random (cf. Lykken & Tellegen, 1993), and the pattern of participants' preferences likely plays a role once a relationship is established.

In fact, there are alternative forms of ideal partner preferences that may better predict outcomes in attraction contexts. For example, other studies have assessed ideals and partner characteristics not as two separate constructs (as in the present study) but instead as one ideal-perception consistency construct (e.g., To what degree does your current romantic partner match

your ideal partner for the characteristic ‘sexy’?’; Campbell, Simpson, Kashy, & Fletcher, 2001; Overall et al., 2006). By incorporating both the participant’s ideal and the partner’s trait into a single item, it is possible that such items mask between-person variance in ideals (variance that had little predictive validity in the Level Metric tests) and essentially function as a within-person ideal–perception assessment (like the Pattern Metric). Of course, additional research will be required to determine how such ideal–perception consistency items map onto the Level and Pattern Metric analyses examined in this report. In addition, people also might desire broader categories or “types” of people to a greater or lesser extent in a romantic partner. For example, people might differ in the extent to which their ideal romantic partner fits the general category of an athlete, an engineer, an activist, or a hipster. These “type” preferences might successfully predict mating outcomes given that social categories often contain information about the relative level of many traits (like the Pattern Metric) and present a broader context for interpreting the component traits (like Study 2). Finally, some recent evidence suggests that implicitly assessed ideal partner preferences may better predict participants’ romantic interest in live dating partners, at least for the characteristic physical attractiveness (Eastwick et al., 2011). Even if traditional measures of romantic partner ideals demonstrate little predictive validity in attraction contexts, alternative assessments of participants’ ideals may prove useful in future research.

Alternative Explanations and Limitations

Study 1 and 2 simple effects. In both Studies 1 and 2, the pattern of romantic interest ratings was nearly identical: The simple effect of ideal-perceived trait match was significant at the post-profile assessment but not at the post-interaction assessment, and the simple effect of assessment was not significant in the ideal condition but was significant in the nonideal condition. As reviewed above, one possible alternative explanation for this pattern of findings in Study 1 is that participants in the nonideal condition merely overlooked the profile traits (which they likely

viewed as neutral) after the live interaction, focusing instead on some of the other normatively desirable characteristics that the confederate possessed. We find this explanation plausible albeit inconsistent with the Study 2 and Study 3 data. The Study 2 participants in the nonideal condition had seen some traits that were less than neutral: Their average ideal preference rating of the “moderately undesirable” trait on the profile was a low -2.1 on a -4 to 4 scale. In Study 3, participants used rating scales (see footnote 4) to indicate their ideal preferences and the target’s characteristics across a wide range of positive and negative traits, and the findings for participants who were reporting on a desired partner in this study were consistent with the Study 1 and 2 results. Given that these studies together tell a relatively coherent story, our use of these different operationalizations of the ideal-perceived trait match across studies arguably represents a strength of the work.

But even considering the Study 1 data in isolation, we are still comfortable drawing the conclusion that the ideal-perceived trait match for the Fletcher et al. (1999) traits that we examined did not significantly impact participants’ romantic interest judgments after the live interaction. This conclusion is different than the claim that participants *failed to use* their ideal partner preferences when rating their romantic interest; in fact, some of them might have done so, especially those in the ideal condition. Consider the following (simplified) example: In a group of women, half of them ideally desire a nice guy and half of them ideally desire a bad boy, but when these women meet nice guys and bad boys, they all like the bad boys. Are the women using their ideal preferences? It is possible that half of them are—the ones who said they ideally desired bad boys, as they indeed liked the actual bad boys more than the nice guys. The remaining half of the women desired partners who were the opposite of their ideal preferences, and this state of affairs would lead to a null effect of ideal-perceived trait match in the sample on average. Perhaps the bad boys possessed other normatively desirable characteristics, but this observation is beside the point:

The ideal-perceived trait match *on the nice guy/bad boy dimension* did not have predictive validity for this sample of women.

Attraction is surely multidetermined; ideals for a single trait or a small handful of traits should in principle be averaged in with other information (even information gleaned from a brief, constrained initial encounter) about a potential romantic partner in determining romantic interest. Within each study, we can only comment on whether the predictive validity hypothesis was supported for the traits that were used in our operationalization of the ideal-perceived trait match. For example, physical attractiveness was not incorporated into the ideal-perceived trait match manipulation in both Studies 1 and 2, so if the average participant's romantic desire judgments were informed only by the ideal-perceived trait match for physical attractiveness, then we would have failed to capture this process. For this reason, it was critical that we investigate a wide array of partner characteristics across all three studies, including the classic Fletcher et al. (1999) traits as well as an assortment of other positive, neutral, and negative traits that have been investigated in research on romantic relationships (e.g., Figueredo et al., 2006; Watson et al., 2004). The broader picture offered by the three studies is clear: When people report on potential (i.e., not current) romantic partners, we have been unable to detect even a small effect of the ideal-perceived trait match for a wide array of positive and negative traits like physical attractiveness, warmth, pride, and neuroticism—as long as a live interaction has taken place.

Of course, it is potentially relevant that the ten confederates we used in Studies 1 and 2 were not toads. Although we did not select them to be attractive or charismatic, they spoke their lines coherently and conducted themselves with appropriate decorum in this social situation. Had we used confederates who were unable to conduct themselves properly (surely a fascinating manipulation to be explored in future research), the simple effects within each ideal-perceived trait match condition might have differed. In this case, perhaps the participants in the ideal condition

would have significantly decreased their romantic interest ratings (because they reinterpreted the confederate's traits in a negative direction), and participants in the nonideal condition would maintained a weak level of romantic interest. But the same conclusion would remain applicable: In the sample on average, ideal partner preferences for particular traits do not predict the extent to which those traits appeal to people in a romantic partner once a live interaction has taken place.

Discerning and Reinterpreting Traits. In initial interactions like those examined in Studies 1 and 2, there is evidence that some traits are more difficult to discern accurately than others. For example, people reach reasonable consensus about physical attractiveness, extraversion, and conscientiousness after a very minimal interaction, but it may take more time for people to accurately assess openness, agreeableness, and neuroticism (Albright, Kenny, & Malloy, 1988; Kenny, 1994). In Studies 1 and 2, the manipulation of ideal-perceived trait match sidestepped this issue because the profile provided participants with the information that the confederate possessed traits that either characterized their ideal or nonideal romantic partner. In Study 3, participants did have to judge the traits themselves, so it is conceivable that the ideal-perceived trait match would have revealed less predictive validity for harder-to-discern traits like earning prospects or unpleasant characteristics (e.g., neuroticism). However, the only trait that received some support in the Level Metric analyses was conservatism, a trait that, given its associations with openness, may be one of the harder traits to accurately discern in interpersonal situations (Gosling, Ko, Mannarelli, & Morris, 2002; Kenny, 1994). Also relevant is that the amount of time that participants had known the target of their attraction in Study 3 did not moderate the predictive validity hypothesis, so it seems unlikely that participants are simply refraining from basing their romantic evaluations on the ideal-perceived trait match until they get to know someone well.

One limitation of the current set of studies is that we do not know how the reinterpretation of traits documented in Study 2 applies to ongoing relationships like those examined in Study 3. It is certainly possible that this reinterpretation would persist indefinitely. After all, the meaning of a trait like “poor earning prospects” changes significantly depending on whether it describes a struggling screenwriter or a burnt-out slacker, and there is no reason to suspect that such definitional subtleties are less true of ongoing relationships than initial romantic encounters. Future research could explore this possibility and also examine whether the level of ideals achieves stronger predictive validity if researchers provide detail about the larger context of the trait when asking about ideals. It is plausible that the extent to which a partner matches a particular ideal dimension could predict romantic evaluations if the ideal is highly contextualized and idiosyncratically generated (e.g., “attends book clubs”) rather than abstract and context-free (e.g., “intelligent”).

Power and Sample size. In Study 3, the predictive validity hypothesis for the Level Metric required tests of statistical interactions, which are generally not high-powered (McClelland & Judd, 1993). We have three responses to this concern. First, our sample sizes for participants reporting on a desired romantic partner and a current romantic partner were so large (~250 per sample) that they provide appropriate tests of interactions (Alexander & DeShon, 1994); even when these two samples were combined into a total sample of $N = 502$ and the Level Metric interactions were tested ($3 \text{ DVs} \times 7 \text{ Partner Characteristics} = 21 \text{ interactions}$), only one interaction beta was significant and positive and one was actually significant and negative. Second, statistical significance issues aside, many of the interaction betas that tested the Level Metric were negative (see Table 2), and as a result, the average beta was nearly zero ($\beta = .02$). Third and most importantly, this paper in general is not grounded in documenting null effects but rather in documenting statistically significant interactions across pairs of contexts. That is, we derived

predictions from prior research and theory about when the ideal-perceived trait match should and should not predict romantic evaluations, and we found significant interactions to support these predictions in all three studies. Specifically, the ideal-perceived trait match predicted romantic interest at the post-profile but not the post-interaction assessment in Studies 1 and 2, and the Pattern metric predicted a variety of dependent variables for participants reporting on a current but not a desired romantic partner in Study 3.

Conclusion

The present set of studies examined how the match between ideal partner preferences and the traits of a potential or current romantic partner affected participants' evaluations of those partners. In attraction contexts, the ideal-perceived trait match predicted romantic desire after viewing a short profile but not after a live interaction had taken place. Additional data suggested that the live interaction may interfere with the effective application of the ideal-perceived trait match because it allows participants to reinterpret the meaning of a potential romantic partner's traits. In established relationships, ideals were not relevant to relationship functioning when the ideals were conceptualized as the desired level of a discrete trait but did predict relationship functioning when analyzed as an overall pattern or template. Particularly when initiating relationships, it seems that potential partners who happen to match our ideal partner preferences get no preferential treatment from our hearts. But once a relationship has been established, the match between a current partner's traits and the pattern of our ideal partner preferences may ultimately affect relationship well-being.

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Footnotes

¹ The first 61 participants to complete the study viewed a trait list made up of 35 traits, whereas the final 39 participants viewed a trait list of 21 traits. We attempted to select traits that would not be communicated clearly during the live interaction so that the interaction would neither confirm nor contradict the information contained in the profile. At the end of the experimental session, the first 61 participants rated each of the 35 traits in terms of how much they learned about the confederate during the interaction with respect to that trait on a scale from 1 (“*I learned nothing about this characteristic*”) to 9 (“*I learned a great deal about this characteristic*”). Only one trait received a score higher than a 6.0 (“communicative”, which was included as part of a profile for only two participants and whose removal did not affect the findings). In addition, the 14 traits that averaged a 3.0 or above on this item were not included in the list of 21 traits administered to the final 39 participants. A dummy code indicating whether the participant was part of the first set of 61 participants or the second set of 39 participants did not significantly interact with either the assessment or the ideal-perceived trait match manipulation to predict the dependent variable, nor was the main effect of the dummy code significant.

² The first 61 participants received one of two sets of instructions just before completing the second Partner Impression Questionnaire. One set of instructions was relatively neutral, whereas the second set encouraged the participant to think about how the confederate’s characteristics compared with his/her ideals. Of the final 39 participants, half of them waited for one minute after every other TAT description while the confederate completed a set of anagrams. This manipulation tested whether a series of delays would give participants more time to compare the confederate to their ideals. Neither of these manipulations significantly moderated the Ideal-Perceived Trait Match × Assessment interaction ($ps > .235$), and so the results are collapsed across them.

³ Recall that participants knew how attractive the confederate was at the very start of the study (before any impressions were assessed) because the confederate always arrived while the participant was waiting. Therefore, it is unlikely that attractiveness information overwhelmed the ideal/nonideal manipulation because participants already had spent several moments in the presence of the confederate before the study technically began.

⁴ This alternative explanation is rendered less likely by the fact that we provided our participants with the full list of traits while viewing the profile so that they would also consider all the other traits that the confederate did *not* select; for participants in the nonideal condition, this would have included all three of the participant's "essential" traits. Nevertheless, it is conceivable that many participants did not reach this logical conclusion. Study 2 addresses this shortcoming in that the profile clearly indicated which traits the confederate did and did not select. Study 3 addresses this shortcoming by using rating scales to assess a partner's traits; unlike a trait that is simply absent from a profile, a low score for a trait on a rating scale by definition indicates that the person does not possess it.

⁵ Asch's (1946) studies all involved participants forming impressions of target individuals "on paper", but Asch's target individuals were specifically created to convey a broader structure; many simple experimental stimuli will surely be too impoverished to generate Asch-like context effects.

⁶ Surprisingly, many of the participants gave high ratings to the trait "crafty". It is possible that these participants interpreted crafty to mean "artsy" or "good with crafts", which was not the intended meaning. Therefore, none of the confederate profiles had crafty circled.

⁷ Of course, this binary relationship status variable does not measure any specific relationship process per se, and those processes that do differentiate established from potential relationships (e.g., intimacy) probably emerge in a continuous fashion as a relationship develops. Nevertheless, this variable offers a clear test of the hypothesis that the difference between the findings of

Fletcher and colleagues and those reported in Studies 1–2 (and in prior speed-dating research) are partially due to the status of participants' relationships with the target of their attraction.

⁸ The sample of 502 participants was a subset of the 783 who completed some portion of the follow-up questionnaire; many of the 783 did not answer large portions of it (presumably because they skipped ahead to receive their personalized feedback) and therefore did not contribute data to the main analyses reported in the Results section. Where relevant, the factor analyses used all available data provided by the 783 follow-up questionnaire respondents.

⁹ Of particular relevance to evolutionary perspectives on mate preferences, the sex differences in the association of Physical Attractiveness and Good Earning Prospects with the dependent variables were nonsignificant in all six cases for single participants and all 14 cases for participants in relationships (0 for 20 in total).

¹⁰ One possible reason that the data revealed stronger support for the Pattern Metric than for the Level Metric is that the Pattern Metric uses more items and represents more constructs than the Level Metric. However, conclusions were identical using a Level Metric that incorporated multiple constructs (the sum of squares for seven Ideal Partner Preference \times Partner Characteristic interactions entered in one regression equation). Thus, the key difference between the Level and Pattern Metric is likely to be in how they represent the similarity between ideals and a partner's characteristics, not that the Pattern Metric by its nature represents more information.

Table 1.

Change of Meaning Traits.

Trait	Anchors
proud	conceited vs. confident
daring	reckless vs. courageous
satirical	cynical vs. witty
persistent	uncompromising vs. diligent
excitable	touchy vs. lively
outspoken	tactless vs. frank
perfectionistic	finicky vs. conscientious
self-contented	pompous vs. poised
undecided	wishy-washy vs. open-minded
conforming	weak vs. cooperative
clownish	silly vs. humorous
crafty	(not used)

Table 2

Effect of Ideal-Perceived Trait Match on Romantic Interest Dependent Variables (Level Metric - Study 3)

Partner Characteristic	Passion		Bondedness		Desirability of Alternatives (rev)		Satisfaction	Commitment	Marriage Intentions	Marital Status
	Single	Coupled	Single	Coupled	Single	Coupled	Coupled	Coupled	Coupled	Coupled
Physically Attractive	-.02	.01	-.08	-.06	.03	.05	-.04	-.02	.02	-.25 [†]
Good Earning Prospects	.04	.06	.06	.02	.09	-.02	.06	.07	.05	-.06
Warm	-.01	-.02	.01	-.06	.04	.02	.04	.00	.05	.03
Exciting	.03	.04	.03	-.04	-.11	.05	.02	.02	.01	.05
Unpleasant	.09	-.02	.04	-.08	-.07	.02	-.01	-.02	.03	-.20
Meek	.04	.08	-.01	.01	-.09	.09	.05	.05	.12 [†]	-.01
Conservative	-.04	.08	.06	.09 [†]	.05	.12*	.09 [†]	.09 [†]	.05	.27*

Note. Values indicate the regression beta for the partner characteristic \times ideal preference interaction predicting the dependent variable. Results are presented separately for participants who were single and who were in a relationship (i.e., coupled). Significant and positive betas indicate that participants' stated ideal partner preferences for a characteristic predicted the extent to which that characteristic was associated with the dependent variable. (Desirability of Alternatives was reverse scored.) Logistic regression was used for the dependent variable Marital Status (coded 0 = dating casually/seriously, 1 = engaged/married).

[†] $p < .10$, * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$.

Table 3

Effect of Ideal-Perceived Trait Match on Romantic Interest Dependent Variables (Pattern Metric - Study 3)

	Passion		Bondedness		Desirability of Alternatives (rev)		Satisfaction	Commitment	Marriage Intentions	Marital Status
	Single	Coupled	Single	Coupled	Single	Coupled	Coupled	Coupled	Coupled	Coupled
Pattern Metric	-.09	.26***	-.05	.11 [†]	-.04	.22***	.34***	.23***	.20**	-.05

Note. Values indicate the regression beta for the pattern metric predicting the dependent variable. Results are presented separately for participants who were single and who were in a relationship (i.e., coupled). Significant and positive betas indicate that the match between the pattern of participants' ideals and the pattern of the traits of their most desire/current partner predicted the dependent variable. (Desirability of Alternatives was reverse scored.) Logistic regression was used for the dependent variable Marital Status (coded 0 = dating casually/seriously, 1 = engaged/married).

[†] $p < .10$, * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$.

Figure Captions

Figure 1: Study 1 results for dependent variable Romantic Interest.

Figure 2: Study 2 results for dependent variable Romantic Interest (Panel A), potential mediator ideal partner preferences (Panel B), and potential mediator trait meaning (Panel C).

Figure 1

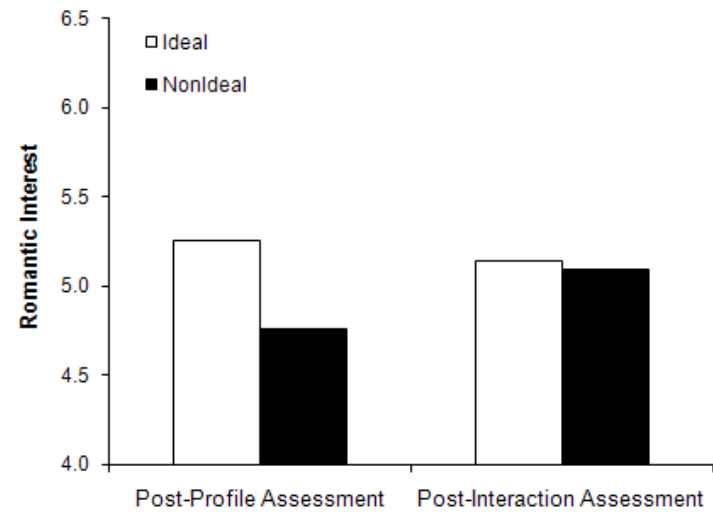
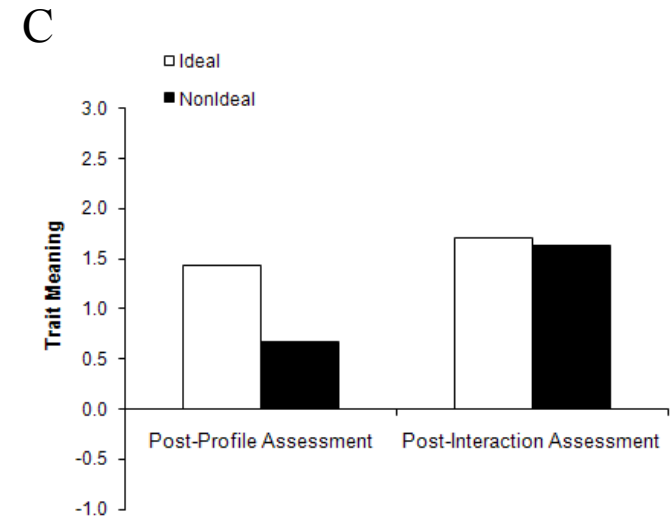
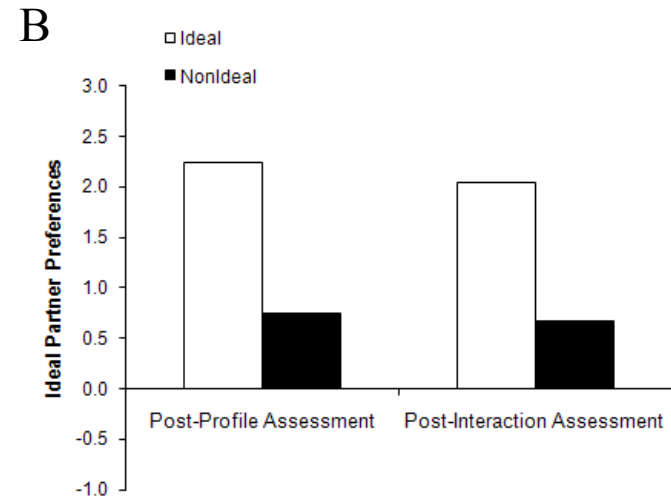
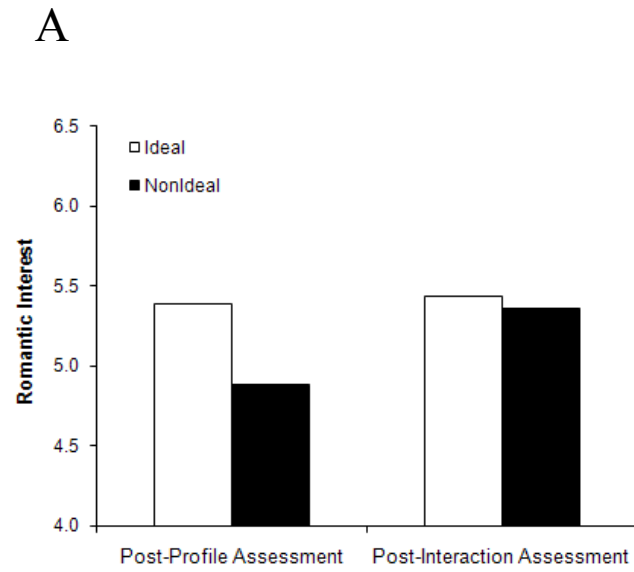


Figure 2



Appendix A – Means, SDs, and Ranges for Study 3 variables

Measure	Single Participants			Participants in Relationships		
	M	SD	Range	M	SD	Range
Dependent Variables						
Passion	5.72	1.92	1.0-9.0	6.85	1.81	1.0-9.0
Bondedness	4.71	2.04	1.0-9.0	6.41	1.73	1.5-9.0
Desirability of Alternatives (rev)	4.29	1.88	1.0-9.0	4.97	1.93	1.0-9.0
Satisfaction				6.59	2.05	1.0-9.0
Commitment				7.47	1.92	1.5-9.0
Marriage Intentions				5.20	2.36	1.0-9.0
Marital Status				0.28	0.45	0 or 1
Ideal Preferences						
Physically Attractive	7.65	1.05	3.5-9.0	7.60	1.00	5.0-9.0
Earning Prospects	7.18	1.00	4.6-9.0	7.27	0.92	4.7-9.0
Warm	8.10	0.72	5.2-9.0	8.07	0.72	5.0-9.0
Exciting	7.61	0.85	5.4-9.0	7.66	0.79	5.0-9.0
Unpleasant	2.98	1.19	1.0-8.2	2.97	1.16	1.0-5.8
Meek	3.76	1.41	1.0-8.0	3.55	1.40	1.0-7.0
Conservative	5.01	1.51	1.0-9.0	4.77	1.48	1.0-8.3
Target Characteristics						
Physically Attractive	2.41	1.23	-4.0-4.0	2.45	1.35	-2.5-4.0
Earning Prospects	1.90	1.26	-4.0-4.0	1.77	1.31	-2.7-4.0
Warm	2.06	1.31	-4.0-4.0	2.60	1.08	-1.8-4.0
Exciting	2.16	1.11	-4.0-4.0	2.13	1.28	-3.6-4.0
Unpleasant	-0.68	1.73	-4.0-3.8	-0.97	1.79	-4.0-3.6
Meek	-0.72	1.56	-4.0-3.3	-0.68	1.73	-4.0-3.7
Conservative	0.00	1.52	-4.0-4.0	-0.20	1.73	-4.0-4.0