The Mating Sociometer: A Regulatory Mechanism for Mating Aspirations

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Two studies (Ns = 80 and 108) tested hypotheses derived from Kirkpatrick and Ellis’s (2001) extension and application of sociometer theory to mating aspirations. Experiences of social rejection—acceptance by attractive opposite-sex confederates were experimentally manipulated, and the impact of these manipulations on self-esteem, mating aspirations, and friendship aspirations was assessed. Results indicated that social rejection—acceptance by members of the opposite sex altered mating aspirations; that the causal link between social rejection—acceptance and mating aspirations was mediated by changes in state self-esteem; and that the impact of social rejection—acceptance by members of opposite sex was specific to mating aspirations and did not generalize to levels of aspiration in approaching potential same–sex friendships. This research supports a conceptualization of a domain-specific mating sociometer, which functions to calibrate mating aspirations in response to experiences of romantic rejection and acceptance.

Keywords: sociometer theory, evolutionary psychology, self-esteem, social rejection, mate choice

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One of the most striking features of human evolution is its intense group orientation. Available evidence suggests that humans evolved in small bands that ranged in number from 50 to 100 members (Tooby & DeVore, 1987). Intense group living meant that the social arena and relationships became an important locus of both fitness opportunities and fitness costs. All group members, however, do not equally experience such opportunities and costs. A fact of group life is that members differ in value (i.e., in the fitness benefits and costs that they can potentially confer or inflict on others). Through selective formation and maintenance of social relationships, individuals can potentially maximize the benefits and minimize the costs of group living. Consequently, members of all social species face the critical adaptive problems of discriminating among conspecifics who differ in value, selectively affiliating with and gaining acceptance from group members who are likely to generate fitness benefits, and selectively avoiding or eliminating group members who represent fitness costs (see especially Kurzban & Leary, 2001).

Arrays of information-processing and emotional–motivational systems are needed to solve these adaptive problems effectively. The current research investigates the role of the self-esteem system in mediating relations between experiences of acceptance or rejection by members of the opposite sex and setting aspiration levels in approaching new relationships.

Although people often idealize and desire highly attractive partners, actual mate selection processes are constrained by a number of factors, including availability of potential mates; personal histories of acceptance and rejection by mates (Kirkpatrick & Ellis, 2001; Todd, 2007); and associated self-assessments of attractiveness, popularity, and other dimensions of mate value (Penke, Todd, Lenton, & Fasolo, 2008; Regan, 1998a). Mate selection processes also involve meeting minimum standards (Regan, 1998b) and fitting “budget” constraints (Li, Bailey, Kenrick, & Linsenmeier, 2002; Li & Kenrick, 2006). Given these realities, how do individuals set aspiration levels in approaching and developing new sexual and romantic relationships? Using an evolutionary framework, Penke et al. (2008) provided an overview of how self-assessments can guide human mating decisions. A key component within this framework is the mating sociometer (Kirkpatrick & Ellis, 2001, 2006).

**Sociometer Theory**

A functional model of the self-esteem system—sociometer theory—has been proposed by Mark Leary and colleagues (Leary & Baumeister, 2000; Leary & Downs, 1995; Leary, Tambor, Terdal, & Downs, 1995). Leary et al. noted that few have asked the fundamental questions of (a) what exactly is self-esteem? and (b)