

Romantic relationships, ideal standards, and mate selection

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In this article we discuss the origins of the Ideal Standards Model (ISM), the content of ideal standards, as well as the function of ideals in existing relationships as well as in mate selection. Empirical research testing hypotheses derived from the ISM are presented. Existing controversies, and suggestions for future research, are also discussed. We conclude that the ISM exemplifies the value of adopting a functional approach to social cognition in romantic relationships along with a focus on dyadic influences.

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The Ideal Standards Model (ISM; [1,2]) proposes that individuals possess chronically accessible mate and relationship ideal standards that are used to evaluate both potential mates and existing partners and romantic relationships. The development of the ISM was derived initially from perhaps the most important founding theory in social psychology concerned with romantic relationships — interdependence theory [3]. This theory postulates that perceptions of relationship quality are a function of the discrepancy between the rewards people perceive they are receiving from a relationship and two kinds of benchmark standards — what they feel they deserve from their relationship (comparison level or CL), and what they think is available from an alternative relationship (comparison level for alternatives, or CLalt). Larger perceived discrepancies involving CL or CLalt results in less satisfaction or commitment with the partner or relationship [4].

The ISM contains two unique features that expand on interdependence theory. First, it uses an evolutionary perspective to specify the content and origin of ideal

mate standards. Second, it adopts a dyadic and functional perspective to ascertain how perceived discrepancies influence affect, cognition, and behavior in romantic relationships, and vice versa.

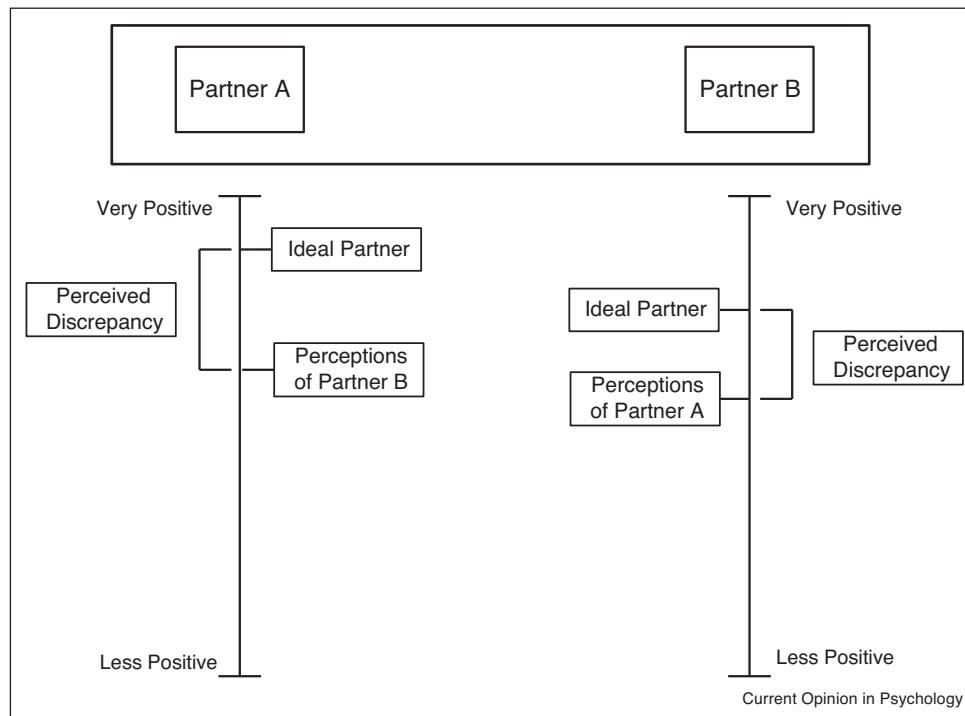
Principles derived from evolutionary theories (see [5,6]) suggest that people judge potential or actual partners on three basic dimensions: (a) warmth and trustworthiness (b) attractiveness and vitality, and (c) social status and resources. Each dimension represents a different route to obtaining a mate and promoting reproductive fitness (see [5]). Being attentive to a partner's capacity for intimacy and commitment should increase chances of finding a cooperative partner who is likely to be a devoted parent. By focusing on attractiveness and vitality or health, individuals are more likely to acquire a mate who is younger, healthier, and perhaps more fertile (especially in the case of men choosing women). And by counting on a partner's resources and status, or the potential to acquire them, individuals should be more likely to obtain a mate who can ascend social hierarchies and form coalitions with other people who have, or can acquire, valued social status or other resources (especially in the case of women choosing men). This tripartite structure regarding how individuals evaluate actual or ideal romantic partners has been empirically supported by factor-analytic studies and is well replicated [1,7].

According to the ISM, the magnitude of the discrepancies between ideal standards and perceptions of the potential or current partner or relationship (hereafter referred to as 'partner discrepancies') allow individuals to (a) evaluate the quality of their partners and relationships, (b) explain what happens in relationships, and (c) regulate both self and partners in relationships (see [Figure 1](#)). Large partner discrepancies indicate an unsatisfactory relationship, which should motivate cognitive adjustments, such as lowering ideal standards or enhancing the partner, or behavioral attempts to change the self or the partner. When individuals fall short of their partner's ideals, they are in a qualitatively different situation. In this case, they may engage in regulatory behaviors designed to reduce the size of their *partner's* discrepancy (e.g., avoid conflict or showcase their own specific qualities in an effort to more closely match the partner's standards).

Partner discrepancies and evaluation

In an initial test of the evaluative function of the ISM, Fletcher *et al.* [1] found that individuals who reported smaller partner discrepancies rated their relationships more favorably. This finding has since been replicated many times (see [8]). Longitudinal studies have also

Figure 1



Example of ideal preferences and partner perceptions, and resulting discrepancies, in both partners.

found that larger partner discrepancies predict higher rates of relationship dissolution both in the early stages of relationship formation [9] and in marital relationships (see [10^{••}]).

Crucially, partner discrepancies should affect not only how individuals evaluate their relationships, but also how the *partners* of individuals feel about the relationship [11]. Campbell and colleagues [12] tested this hypothesis by asking both members of a large sample of dating couples to report their ideal standards, including how closely their partners matched their ideals. Individuals reported higher levels of relationship quality when they more closely matched their partner's ideal standards (see also [7]).

According to the ISM, one of the main functions of ideal standards is to help individuals evaluate the quality of their romantic relationships by accurately identifying areas of strength and weakness in both themselves and their romantic partners [2]. Indeed, recent research using two large samples of heterosexual dating and married partners found that individuals accurately gauged the extent to which they met their partners ideal mate standards, and being aware of how closely one matched their partner's ideals partly mediated the link between how their partners evaluated them and their own relationship satisfaction [13^{••}]. Furthermore, Campbell and colleagues [13^{••}] found that the accuracy of these inferences

were a function of the way partners behaved toward each other during diagnostic conflict interactions.

Partner discrepancies and regulation

In the first test of the regulatory functions of ideal standards, as proposed by the ISM, Overall and colleagues [7] reported that higher partner discrepancies were associated with greater regulation attempts, and these links operated independently within each of the ISM dimensions (warmth and trustworthiness, attractiveness and vitality, and status and resources). Longitudinal analyses over a 6-month period found that higher partner discrepancies predicted increased regulation attempts over time, along with more negative relationship evaluations. Reflecting the dyadic nature of these processes, more regulation by one individual, for example in terms of expressing affection, was associated with the target partner becoming more aware that they were not living up to their partners' expectations, developing a more a more negative view of their own ability to express affection, and trying to become more overtly affectionate.

In a follow-up study, Overall and colleagues [14] had couples discuss aspects of each other that they wanted to see changed while they were being videotaped. The enactment of more active strategies during the discussion (both positive and negative) was viewed by both partners as less successful in promoting the desired

change immediately after the discussion, consistent with the findings described previously. However, a full and frank discussion of the partner's shortfalls was associated over the following year with greater change in the targeted features as reported by both partners. In stark contrast, more indirect strategies such as loyalty, did not produce any behavioral change at all (see also [15]).

As Campbell and colleagues [12] point out, feeling that a partner falls short of one's ideals may indicate a failure to reach an important relationship goal, whereas falling short of a *partner's* ideals may indicate that one could face rejection for being a less-than-perfect partner. Thus, the perceived options available to partners when confronted with each type of discrepancy should diverge in important and predictable ways.

Lackebauer and Campbell [16**] tested the potentially unique outcomes associated with each type of ideal discrepancy. Across a series of five studies, participants who perceived their partners as discrepant from their ideal standards experienced more dejection-related emotions (e.g., dissatisfied, upset) and a more promotion-focused regulatory style (i.e., focusing on behaviors to enact to achieve a relationship goal), suggesting that such partner discrepancies activate nurturance-related concerns. Consistent with regulatory focus theory [17], however, perceived discrepancy with the partner's ideal standards was associated with agitation-related emotions (e.g., guilty, anxious) and a prevention focus (i.e., focusing on behaviors to avoid to achieve a relationship goal).

This latter form of partner discrepancy, and resulting regulatory focus, seems to be linked to fears about negative outcomes that could occur and, thus, activates security-related concerns, which can in turn lead to behavior aimed at preventing feared negative outcomes (see [16**]). Especially for people involved in generally satisfying and committed relationships, this prevention strategy is likely to reduce partner discrepancies and maintain relationship satisfaction.

Trade-offs and sex differences

The ISM has also proved helpful in understanding sex differences in mate preferences, and how people trade-off different traits in mate selection. The classic sex difference replicated across cultures and studies is that women give more weight to status and resources than men, whereas men give less importance to physical attractiveness (see [8*]). The same pattern is observed in studies where individuals are forced to choose individuals who are either good-looking and poor or homely and wealthy (i.e., men prefer the former whereas women prefer the latter mix of characteristics) [18]. On the other hand, in long-term relationships, being warm and trustworthy trumps the possession of other kinds of characteristics for both men and women [18,19].

This pattern of sex differences is typically explained in terms of parental investment theory; namely, men are capable of having many more children than women and also invest less in raising children than women. Thus, men should be less focused than women on the ability of their partners to provide resources and status over the long haul of parenting. Men should also be more inclined toward a short-term mating strategy and be less choosy than women in the early stages of mate selection, as indeed is the case (see a meta-analysis by [20**]).

A serious challenge to the ISM has been mounted by Eastwick and colleagues who have reported little evidence for stated mate preferences being translated into actual mate choices in speed-dating studies (see [21]), and correspondingly no evidence of sex differences in actual choices. However, Fletcher and colleagues [20**,22*] have argued that such claims are problematic. Replicating other research, Fletcher and colleagues [20**] found that both men and women pay much more attention to attractiveness and vitality than other traits when choosing whether or not to make further contact after short interactions with strangers. Using observer ratings to provide target benchmarks, they also reported that men and women were much more accurate in judging surface traits like attractiveness and vitality than more abstruse internal traits like sensitivity or ambition. Moreover, women were found to be choosier than men as function of women possessing higher minimum standards on attractiveness/vitality than men. Thus women are less romantically drawn to their potential partners and say 'no' more often to any future contact. Taking these findings together suggests that the process of early mate selection is quite functional, and also explains why there may be no sex differences in the links between stated mate preferences and mate choices in this context; namely both men and women rationally base their initial mate-worthiness judgments on precisely those surface characteristics that can be accurately judged.

The bulk of research on the predictive validity of ideal partner preferences, however, has so far focused on the very early stages of mate selection (e.g., interpersonal attraction/liking for hypothetical or actual interaction partners). No systematic research currently exists assessing when and how ideal partner preferences predict actual relationship *initiation* and *formation* beyond this very early stage [23*]. Research on this topic is sorely needed before definitive conclusions regarding the predictive validity of ideal partner preferences in this context can be reached.

Conclusions

The initial development of the ISM, blending elements of interdependence and evolutionary theories, has generated original hypotheses regarding relationship processes and mate selection. Since its inception an impressive

amount of research, including correlational, experimental, and dyadic designs, has provided general empirical support for the model. It exemplifies the value of adopting a functional approach to social cognition in romantic relationships along with a focus on dyadic influences.

References and recommended reading

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- of special interest
- of outstanding interest

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 10. Eastwick PW, Luchies LB, Finkel EJ, Hunt LL: **The predictive validity of ideal partner preferences: a review and meta-analysis.** *Psychol Bull* 2014, **140**:623-665.
- Eastwick and colleagues present the results of a meta-analysis of the empirical literature investigating links between stated ideal preferences and study outcomes in different relationship contexts. They found that ideal preferences predicted attraction to hypothetical potential partners that matched these preferences, but not with actual potential partners after an initial interaction.
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This research demonstrated that individuals are aware of how closely they match their partner's ideal preferences, and that individuals are more

satisfied when they accurately infer more closely matching their partner's ideals. It also showed that individuals more accurately inferred how closely they matched their partner's ideals following a conflict discussion with their partner.

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Following a 10-min interaction with potential mates, this research found that judgments of attractiveness/vitality perceptions (compared with warmth/trustworthiness and status/resources) were the most accurate and were predominant in influencing romantic interest and decisions about further contact. Additionally, women were more cautious and choosy than men—women underestimated their partner's romantic interest, whereas men exaggerated it, and women were less likely to want further contact. Lastly, a mediational model found that women (compared with men) were less likely to want further contact because they perceived their partners as possessing less attractiveness/vitality and as falling shorter of their minimum standards of attractiveness/vitality, thus generating lower romantic interest.

23. Campbell L, Stanton SCE: **The predictive validity of ideal partner preferences in relationship formation: what we know, what we don't know, and why it matters.** *Soc Pers Psychol Compass* 2014, **8**:485-494.

A review of the articles included in a meta-analysis on the predictive validity of ideal partner preferences (see Ref. [10**]) found that none of these studies assessed actual relationship formation. It is argued that it is therefore not possible to make conclusions about the degree to which ideal preferences influence actual mate choice, and that research is desperately needed on the role of ideal preferences (if any) in actual relationship formation.