

# RELATIONSHIP BELIEFS AND COMPATIBILITY PREFERENCES IN ROMANTIC PARTNERS

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## ABSTRACT

Recently, we identified 24 factors (e.g., appearance, conformity) that may capture whether people want to be similar or different from their sexual and romantic partners on different qualities in 274 ( $n_{\text{Women}} = 225$ ) Italians (Marchi et al., 2023; *Personality and Individual Differences*). Here we reanalyzed that data, turning to relationship beliefs we also assessed. Participants believed similarity was more important than complementary in relationships but beliefs that physical attractiveness was important trumped both. However, beliefs that physical attractiveness was important were unrelated to any of the compatibility factors and complementarity beliefs were only related to three of them, while nearly two-thirds of the correlations with similarity beliefs were significant (e.g., residence, speech). We discussed our results in terms of how different generalized relationship beliefs may manifest themselves in how similar people want their romantic/sexual partners to be.

MATE PREFERENCES  
COMPATIBILITY  
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**KEYWORDS**

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## INTRODUCTION

While the question of what people want in relationships reaches back at least to Freud (Jones, 1953) when he asked what a woman wanted, research attempting to answer this question(s) has focused more on the features that people want or not in their romantic or sexual partners (Csajbók et al., 2023; Jach et al., 2022) as opposed to the qualities shared between the pair which may influence compatibility (Marchi et al., 2023). Whether two people are compatible will influence rates of marital discord and may even increase reproductive fitness (Dijkstra & Barelds, 2008; Wu et al., 2020): thus, it seems like an important, albeit neglected, area of research. We recently identified 24 features that may define the relationship compatibility space, but we focused on factor analyses and love styles (Marchi et al., 2023) while the beliefs people have about relationships may also be informative.

In this study, we focus on three relationship beliefs. First, we consider the belief that “opposites attract” or the complementarity hypothesis (Kirkpatrick & Davis, 1994). While there is limited evidence about this belief promoting relationship success, people continue to believe it (Vohs et al., 2011). It is possible that differences are valued in short-term relationships as opposed to long-term ones because it may increase excitement and drama but most research focuses only on serious relationships. Second, we consider beliefs that “birds of a feather flock together” or the similarity hypothesis (Luo, 2017). This should be the more common belief relative to complementarity beliefs because (1) it fits better with common sense predictions and (2) predicts desirable relationship outcomes, at least in long-term relationships (Wu et al., 2020). And last, we also consider beliefs about how important physical attractiveness is in relationships. Despite some protestations, physical attractiveness is the first factor that operates in mate selection; acting as a threshold trait (March & Jonason, 2023). If so, beliefs about the importance of physical attractiveness should be stronger than the others but the preference for physical attractiveness is likely orthogonal to compatibility (Jonason & March, 2022).

In this study, we add to our recent research on compatibility in sexual/romantic mate preferences. We contend that people have beliefs about relationships which may be related to how similar or different they want their partners to be on 24 different compatibility metrics. We explore how these patterns may differ in those who were single as compared to those in committed relationships and long-/short-term nature of the relationship being considered.

## METHOD

### PARTICIPANTS & PROCEDURE

Our analyses relied on 274 participants (49 men, 225 women), aged 19 to 64 years old ( $M = 27.89$ ,  $SD = 8.39$ ), mostly heterosexual (84%) in committed relationships (62%). They proceeded through a standard, online self-report study that was approved by the Ethical Committee for Psychological Research at the University of Padua (#4500). Data can be found on the Open Science Framework.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Data is available at <https://osf.io/w9p2n/>

## MEASURES

Participants were provided an *ad hoc* list of 153 items, that were reduced to 24 factors, describing the preference (1 = *very different*; 7 = *very similar*) they had in a long-term ( $n = 152$ ) or short-term ( $n = 122$ ) relationship toward an ideal partner. The scales had moderate-to-good internal consistency as measured with correlations for two-item factors ( $r_s = .24$  to  $.73$ ) and multi-item factors (Cronbach's  $\alpha_s = .56$  to  $.82$ ) and captured aspects of compatibility like emotions, sociality, opinions, and origins.

To test the role of lay beliefs in romantic relationships, we created three items. To measure the importance people placed in the compatibility in romantic and sexual relationships, we asked participants how much they believed opposites attract and people who are similar are best suited (1 = *not at all*; 5 = *very much*). To measure the centrality of physical attractiveness in who people think form couples, participants rated how important they believed physical attractiveness to be (1 = *not important at all*; 5 = *very important*). Complementarity beliefs were positively correlated with perceived physical attractiveness centrality ( $r[274] = .15$ ,  $p = .01$ ) but negatively with similarity beliefs ( $r[274] = -.28$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Similarity beliefs did not correlate with perceived physical attractiveness ( $r[274] = -.02$ ,  $p = .79$ ).

## RESULTS

Our sample had few men, we ignored sex differences/moderations and instead, focused on a 2 (relationship status)  $\times$  2 (relationship context)  $\times$  3 (lay beliefs) mixed model ANOVA. A main effect for lay beliefs ( $F[2, 270] = 101.99$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .03$ ) suggested that participants believed that similar individuals are better suited ( $M = 2.53$ ,  $SD = 0.73$ ) more ( $p < .001$ ) than they believed that opposites attract ( $M = 1.71$ ,  $SD = 0.90$ ) but less ( $p = .04$ ) than they perceived physical attractiveness was central ( $M = 2.67$ ,  $SD = 0.77$ ). In addition, we tentatively found ( $F[1, 270] = 3.33$ ,  $p = .07$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .01$ ) that single participants ( $M = 2.35$ ,  $SD = 0.90$ ) had slightly stronger ( $p = .07$ ) lay beliefs than those in a relationship ( $M = 2.25$ ,  $SD = 0.91$ ).

We then correlated the three lay beliefs with the compatibility indexes (Table 1). Overall, we found no correlations for beliefs about the importance of physical attractiveness and only three for complementarity beliefs. Participants who believed that opposites attract perceived a partner as compatible when different from them in lifestyle, intellect, and activity. In contrast we found 15 (63%) positive correlations for similarity beliefs with, for instance, opinions, emotions, and romanticism.

We found few cases of moderation (Fisher's  $z$ ) of these correlations by relationship context and relationship status ( $p_s \leq .05$ ).<sup>2</sup> The belief that physical attractiveness is central was stronger in the short-term ( $r[122] = .16$ ,  $p = .04$ ) than in the long-term context ( $r[152] = -.15$ ,  $p = .04$ ) among those preferring a similar partner in opinions ( $z = -2.54$ ), and in the short-term ( $r[122] = .14$ ,  $p = .06$ ) than in the long-term context ( $r[152] = -.12$ ,  $p = .07$ ) among those preferring a similar partner in sociality ( $z = -2.13$ ). The same belief was also stronger in the short-term ( $r[122] = .21$ ,  $p = .01$ ) than in the long-term context ( $r[152] = -.08$ ,  $p = .17$ ) among those preferring a similar partner in class ( $z = -2.39$ ), and in the short-term ( $r[122] = .16$ ,  $p = .04$ ) than in the long-term context ( $r[152] = -.14$ ,  $p = .05$ ) among those preferring a similar partner in empathy ( $z = -2.46$ ). The belief that opposites attract was stronger ( $z = 2.47$ ) in the long-term ( $r[152] = .21$ ,  $p = .01$ ) than in the short-term context ( $r[122] = -.09$ ,  $p = .17$ ) among those preferring a similar partner in morale, but it was weaker ( $z = -2.73$ ) in the long-term ( $r[152] = -.25$ ,  $p = .001$ ) than in the short-term context ( $r[122] = .08$ ,  $p = .18$ ) among those preferring a similar partner in activity. Turning to moderation

<sup>2</sup> All the moderated correlations are on the OSF site for this study.

**Table 1. Correlations between the 24 ways to be compatible and beliefs about the importance of physical attractiveness (PA) and attraction of opposite/similar individuals**

Index	PA	Opposite	Similar
Lifestyle	.01	-.14*	.15**
Opinions	.10	-.06	.24**
Emotions	.07	-.02	.12*
Origins	-.04	-.09	.04
Sociality	-.01	-.05	.11*
Romanticism	.04	-.07	.15*
Morale	-.03	.06	.05
Family	.04	.06	-.05
Food	.02	.03	.01
Sensation	<.01	-.09	.10*
Class	.03	-.07	.18**
Religion	-.02	-.08	.09
Conformity	-.09	-.01	.13*
Leisure	<.01	-.01	.15**
Appearance	.08	-.09	.06
Job	.05	-.03	.11*
Conflict	.01	-.08	.07
Empathy	-.01	-.06	.11*
Humor	<.01	-.02	.10
Residence	-.09	-.02	.12*
Speech	<.01	-.02	.13*
Intellect	-.08	-.24**	.22**
Enthusiasm	-.07	-.03	.18**
Activity	-.01	-.10*	.08

Note. Correlations are uncorrected.

\*  $p < .05$ , \*\*  $p < .01$

by relationship status, among participants preferring a similar partner in residence, those who were single ( $r[172] = .12$ ,  $p = .05$ ) compared to those who were in a relationship ( $r[168] = -.11$ ,  $p = .08$ ) differed in the belief that opposites attract ( $z = 1.84$ ).

## DISCUSSION

What people believe about relationships should be related to their mate preferences, including how similar they want their romantic or sexual partners to be. However, there is alarmingly little research on compatibility let alone in relation to relationship beliefs. Importantly, we provided strong evidence that people think being similar is more important than being different or complementary and that it is the former that affects patterns in preferences for compatible partners. In our study the belief that physical attractiveness is central was the strongest relationship belief, but it did not correlate with any of the 24 factors of compatibility. The belief that opposites attract was the weakest and it correlated with preference for a partner who differed in lifestyle, intellect, and activity.

On the other hand, the belief that similar individuals are better suited correlated with preference for a similar partner in multiple factors. Participants who supported this belief preferred a partner like them in factors concerning the emotional sphere (e.g., emotions, romanticism, enthusiasm, and empathy), social values (e.g., opinions and conformity), practical life details (e.g., lifestyle, class, leisure, job, and residence), and personal features (e.g.,

sociality, speech, and intellect). People who believe in similarity might prefer a similar partner in social values, emotions, and personal features both because they are positive feedback on their vision of the world and common grounds for conversation and mutual understanding (Baxter & West, 2003). Moreover, they might prefer a similar partner in practical life details because it facilitates life sharing and increases chances of doing things together (Kalmijn, 1994). Surprisingly, participants did not prefer similarity for morals and religion, but they do for comparable factors such as opinions and conformity. Those who preferred similarity in opinions, sociality, class, and empathy perceived physical attractiveness more central only when in the short-term context. People's relationship beliefs might become stronger depending on the specific relationship context.

## LIMITATIONS & CONCLUSIONS

As a secondary use of this data, we will not repeat, at length, the limitations of this data like the WEIRD sample, the new compatibility factors not having been tested fully, the female-biased nature of the sample, and internal consistency concerns. Instead, we draw attention to the limitations of this specific study. First, we only used single-item measures of relationship beliefs. While they can be trusted for narrow-band constructs that are not subject to high levels of social desirability biases or self-knowledge short-comings, more psychometrically robust measures are preferable. Second, these three beliefs surely do not represent the full range of lay beliefs about relationships. For instance, beliefs about destiny, love at first sight, and the centrality of sexual desires may be worth investigating. Third, we found only three correlations with complementarity beliefs which might be an artifact of range restriction given how people overwhelmingly think similarity and attractiveness are more important. Fourth, it seems reasonable that different societies would have different relationship beliefs given the culture of love found therein (Goodwin & Gaines, 2004) which could then lead to different mate preferences in compatibility. Lastly, the high number of correlations might result in Type I error inflation. Future studies should use a higher statistical power.

In sum, we focused on one of the most under-researched areas of mate preference: compatibility. First, we compared beliefs in three relationship beliefs revealing that (1) people especially think physical attractiveness matters but (2) they agreed that similarity was more important than complementarity in their relationship partners. Second, we tracked how these relationship beliefs were correlated with how desirable people thought hypothetical long-term and short-term partners might be when characterized by 24 different features that may define the compatibility space (Marchi et al., 2023). Overwhelmingly, beliefs that "birds of a feather flock together" were correlated with many preferences in compatible partners. Future studies could also examine actual experience of compatibility within existing relationships.

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