

The Search for a Romantic Partner:  
The Effects of Self-Esteem and Physical Attractiveness  
on Romantic Behavior<sup>1</sup>

Sara B. Kiesler and Roberta L. Baral

Connecticut College

What do people look for in a romantic partner? Observations of everyday life suggest one "common sense" assumption: that people wish to maximize the attractiveness and favorability of a romantic partner. For those who actually find a very attractive and socially desirable partner come rewards from family or friends, approving glances from strangers, and perhaps greater occupational advancement, as well as direct rewards from attainment of a nearly "ideal" partner.

Yet if the person himself were truly objective, he should consider what is most practical. That is, what is the probability of payoff for various alternative attempts to win a partner? Thus, while attainment of a very attractive partner might be very rewarding, the chances of actually "catching" such a person are likely to be somewhat lower than are the chances of winning a less attractive partner. The very attractive person will ordinarily be less available because of excessive competition for him or her, may have higher "standards", and may be more likely to reject someone of lesser social desirability, than will the moderately or low attractive person. Hence, if one is only moderately or low attractive himself, the most realistic initial choice would consider both the wish to maximize attractiveness of a partner and also the likelihood of positive payoff.

For the "average" sort of person such realistic behavior (in the narrow sense of taking probable payoffs, as well as ideal goals, into account) should entail his choosing a person who is not extremely attractive, but rather is similar in attractiveness to himself. By choosing a person similar in overall favorability, attractiveness is maximized while the risk of rejection or failure is minimized.

Yet people do not always end up choosing someone who is actually similar in favorability. A recent study by Walster, Rottman, Aronson, and Abrahams (1966) provides an example. These investigators took advantage of a college mixer dance in which dates were matched randomly to study the relationship of physical attractiveness to liking and romantic behavior. In general, they found that the more attractive the female date was, the better liked she was and the more the man said he would like to date her, regardless of his own physical attractiveness. Furthermore, the same finding held for women. The more attractive the male date, the more he was liked and wanted as a date again, regardless of the woman's own attractiveness.

The question now arises as to why the moderately and low attractive persons in the Walster, et al. study tended to choose the most attractive partners. Presumably, if these subjects were to act objectively, they should choose persons similar in attractiveness. One possibility is that the subjects over-evaluated their own attractiveness and therefore did choose partners who seemed similar to them. The situation was festive, and all the subjects were dressed up and prepared to present their best "face". In such a context, it may have been relatively easy to distort

personal attributes and end up with relatively high "self-esteem". Even if subjects did not misperceive their own physical attractiveness (e.g., "when I get all dressed up I really look good"), they could have felt that their intelligence, personality or social poise made up for any deficiency in physical attractiveness. If they did, in fact, have relatively high self-esteem and did exaggerate their socially desirable attributes, then highly attractive partners would have been perceived as relatively similar in total favorability of attributes, if not in physical attractiveness, itself. Thus, their behavior was realistic in that both chances of success and maximization of attractiveness were considered. They merely ended up choosing someone who objectively was of higher attractiveness.

That people do over-evaluate themselves in many situations has long been known to psychologists. Traditionally, the exaggeration of socially desirable attributes and minimization of socially undesirable attributes has been treated either as an annoying response set in psychological tests or as a personality trait of some importance for social interaction (cf. Crowne and Marlowe, 1964). Yet it is certainly reasonable to assume that in some situations the tendency to over-evaluate oneself will be greater than in others. For example, a prior "success" experience should raise a person's self-esteem and feelings of worthiness (e.g., Aronson and Carlsmith, 1962). In the romantic behavior situation, then, certain situational conditions which raise self-esteem and encourage over-evaluation of self may be of some importance in affecting what that romantic behavior will be. We have assumed

that one effect will be on the person's perceptions of a potential partner, i.e., if self-esteem is high, he will perceive an objectively more attractive person as being relatively similar in attractiveness to himself.

Let us now consider what would happen if the person were forced to feel less worthy (i.e., to have low self-esteem). If, for instance, a person were presented with convincing evidence indicating that he was not overly intelligent, say, then it would be harder for him to distort his self-image in a favorable direction and he might be more cautious about offering his company to an unusually attractive person. The very attractive partner would be perceived as higher in attractiveness and therefore the probability of positive payoff would seem relatively low compared to the probability of success with a partner only moderate in attractiveness. Unlike the person with high self-esteem, to whom the very attractive partner seems similar, the person with low self-esteem should perceive the very attractive partner as relatively dissimilar and "hard to get", and should end up choosing a partner whose summed attributes were actually closer in favorability to his own.

We propose, then, that whether the person is feeling good or bad, whether he has high or low self-esteem, or whether he is exaggerating his socially desirable attributes or not, the process is the same: to maximize attractiveness of the partner while minimizing the chances of failure, he chooses someone who seems to offer attributes which, in total, are about equally favorable to his own. The self-

esteem variable, however, should determine who seems about equally favorable, and, in turn, whether the choice is of a partner of objectively higher attractiveness or objectively of about the same attractiveness.

From the considerations above the following hypothesis was formulated: The lower the self-esteem, the more the person should choose a romantic partner who is objectively similar to himself in attractiveness. Thus, we predicted that moderately attractive males will tend to choose and like very attractive females if they have high self-esteem, but will tend to choose moderately attractive females if they have low self-esteem.

In order to test our hypothesized interaction between self-esteem and attractiveness of the partner an experiment was designed in which two levels of self-esteem, high and low, and two levels of physical attractiveness of a female, high and moderate, were orthogonally varied. Male subjects were first led to believe that they were doing very well or rather poorly on an intelligence test. We assumed that the former condition would lead to temporary high self-esteem and encourage over-evaluation of self, and that the latter condition would lead to a temporary lowering of self-esteem and would discourage over-evaluation of self. The subjects were then exposed to a female of very high or only moderate physical attractiveness. Subsequently, observations were made of the subjects' romantic behavior.

#### Method

##### Subjects

Subjects were 43 male volunteers ranging in age from 19 to 37. They were recruited from the New Haven, Connecticut area, including

Southern Connecticut College, Yale Medical School, language laboratories at Yale University, New Haven College, and local libraries. The subjects included mostly college students and graduate students, but also a few men in various occupations (e.g., high school teacher). Of the 43 subjects, six were excluded from the final analysis: 1 for suspicion, 1 for knowing the confederate previously, 2 because they were married, and 2 because they were engaged. The subjects were paid \$1.50 for their participation.

### Procedure

The subjects were recruited for a one-hour study on "intelligence testing". As each subject arrived he was ushered into an ordinary faculty office at Yale University by a male experimenter. The experimenter told the subject that he was perfecting and establishing norms for a new intelligence test which had already been successfully used on "hundreds" of students. He emphasized that the test was already very accurate and reliable, and that it predicted "success in life". He then asked the subject to take the test orally, explaining that it consisted of five parts which would be presented sequentially.

### Self-esteem manipulation

The subjects were randomly assigned to the low or high self-esteem condition. In both conditions the "test" was the same. Subjects were first required to repeat from memory long lists of numbers; in a second part, they were asked to define words. To reduce initial variance in performance, the test was made extremely difficult. For instance, some of the words to be defined were fictitious (e.g., "sympantic").

The manipulation of high self-esteem was accomplished by conveying to the subject the impression that his performance pleased the experimenter and was better than that of most subjects. At pre-programmed intervals the experimenter smiled and nodded; at others he told the subject that other subjects had had much more trouble with the questions. In addition, the number task was made somewhat easier by reading the numbers with some rhythm. Thus performance was actually a little better in the high self-esteem condition than in the low self-esteem condition.

In the low self-esteem condition the experimenter attempted to convey the impression that he was displeased with the subject's performance. At intervals he frowned and looked away or mentioned that other subjects had performed better. At other intervals he asked the subject if he felt "relaxed enough".

After the "second part" of the test, the experimenter suggested a break. He then gave the subject a short questionnaire, saying that it was a "Psychology Department questionnaire administered to all subjects in studies at Yale". This questionnaire was designed to check on the self-esteem manipulation.

When the subject had filled out the questionnaire the experimenter stood up and said he "hadn't eaten all day and really needed a cup of coffee". Low self-esteem subjects were told that "maybe a break will help you". High self-esteem subjects were told that "since you are doing so well we have plenty of time". He asked the subject to come with him to get a cup of coffee. Just before they left the room,

the experimenter "noticed" a telephone message on his desk and remarked that "he'd better take care of it soon". This sequence was performed in order to prepare the subject for the experimenter's eventual departure.

#### Meeting the potential romantic partner

The experimenter took the subject to a small canteen in the same building and bought the coffee. As he turned to sit down, he appeared to recognize a girl seated at one of the tables and approached her. This girl was actually one of two confederates used in the study. The experimenter greeted the confederate and asked her if she were working in the building during the summer. She was then introduced to the subject as a coed at a nearby college doing summer work for a psychologist, and a pre-programmed conversation was begun.

After a minute, the experimenter excused himself, telling the subject that "now would be a good time to make that phone call". He was gone for ten minutes, during which the confederate engaged the subject in further conversation (asking him what he did, likes and dislikes, etc.). The experimenter then returned and acting displeased, told the subject that since his "fiancee really needs the car" he would have to break off the experiment. He apologized, paid the subject, and left. The confederate then continued talking with the subject for one-half hour, or, until the subject attempted to leave or asked her for a date, whichever came first.

#### Physical attractiveness manipulation

The female confederate appeared in one of two attractiveness conditions, "high" or "moderate". Both confederates appeared in both



conditions in random sequence. The confederates were chosen because they were highly attractive. In the high attractive condition the confederates wore becoming make-up and fashionable clothing designed to enhance their initial attractiveness. In the moderate attractiveness condition an attempt was made to reduce their initial attractiveness somewhat. The confederate wore no make-up, heavy glasses, and had her hair pulled back with a rubber band. Her skirt and blouse clashed and was arranged sloppily.

During the interaction the confederates attempted to act exactly the same in all conditions. They were friendly, accepting and interested throughout. To reduce bias, confederates were not informed of the self-esteem condition that subjects were in.

The dependent variable: romantic behavior

After the experimenter "concluded" the experiment and during the following half hour the confederate recorded the frequency of behavior falling into certain prescribed categories of "romantic behavior". The categories included asking for a date, asking for information which presumably will lead to a date (e.g., asking for the confederate's phone number), offering to buy a snack or coffee for her, offering her a cigarette or mint already on hand, complimenting her, and finally, ignoring her when, at the end of the prescribed time, she said she should "get back to work" (called, "ignoring the first cue to leave"). At first, it was intended also to measure the amount of time the subject stayed with the confederate, but this measure turned out to be unreliable since confederates had to stop the experiment if

subjects asked them for a date. It should be noted, however, that the vast majority did not attempt to leave before the time was up (80%).

At the end of the experimental session, the confederate completely debriefed the subject and in particular emphasized the real nature of the intelligence test. After the debriefing subjects were asked to rate the confederate on her attractiveness. Although this attempt to check on the attractiveness manipulation has limited validity, giving it during the experiment would, of course, have incurred suspicion.

## Results

### Effectiveness of the manipulations

Subjects were asked two questions to check on the self-esteem manipulation. These were, "How would you describe your present emotional feelings?" (on a scale from "very happy" to "very sad"), and "How good do you personally feel your performance is in the task required in the present study?" (on a scale from "excellent" to "poor"). Both scales were arbitrarily scored from 1-20, the higher the score the lower the self-esteem. According to analyses of variance performed on these data, subjects in the high self-esteem condition tended to feel better than did low self-esteem subjects ( $F=3.89$ ,  $df=1, 33$ ,  $p<.10$ ), and felt their performance was better ( $F=13.71$ ,  $df=1, 33$ ,  $p<.01$ ). Thus, while the generalized mood response to the manipulation was somewhat weaker than the more direct measure of self-esteem (felt adequacy of performance) the manipulation seemed to have been effective overall.

The manipulation of physical attractiveness of the confederate was also effective (although one must have reservations about our measure). Subjects who interacted with the "moderately attractive" confederate gave

her an average rating of 68.5 (on a 100-point scale); subjects interacting with the "very attractive" confederate gave her a mean rating of 87.6. This difference was significant at the .01 level ( $F=10.43$ ,  $df=1, 33$ ).

To check on possible differences between the two confederates all data on romantic behavior (described in detail below) were subjected first to three-way analyses of variance (self-esteem X attractiveness X confederate). These analyses revealed significant tendencies for one confederate to elicit more romantic behavior than the other, however, there were no interactions of confederate with any independent variable. Thus, the data for both confederates were combined for the analyses presented below.

Comparisons were also made between the first half of the experiment and the last half to check on possible confederate bias as a result of learning to recognize cues distinguishing high self-esteem subjects from low self-esteem subjects. However, the analysis indicated there was no difference between phases of the experiment.

### Romantic behavior

We predicted an interaction such that high self-esteem subjects would display more romantic behavior towards the highly attractive confederate, whereas low self-esteem subjects would display more romantic behavior towards the moderately attractive confederate. To test this prediction we first summed the frequency of romantic behavior in each behavioral category for each subject. Any subject could get a score of 0 or 1 in each category except the "ask for date" category where he could obtain a score of 2 if he asked for two dates. Thus, a subject's romantic

behavior "score" could range from 0 to 7. The mean scores for each condition are graphically presented in Figure 1. Because the data were distributed in skewed fashion, the scores were transformed to produce a more normal distribution ( $X' = \log [X + 2]$ ). These data were then subjected to an analysis of variance. According to the analysis of variance, the hypothesized interaction between self-esteem and attractiveness was supported ( $F = 5.34$ ;  $df = 1,33$ ;  $p < .05$ ).

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Put Fig. 1 about here

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Thus, high self-esteem subjects tended to choose the high attractive girl, while low self-esteem subjects tended to prefer the moderately attractive girl, as predicted.

Table 2 presents a breakdown of the data for each romantic behavior category. For purposes of simplification, the percentage of subjects in each condition who displayed each type of romantic behavior (i.e., the percentage who got a score of 1 in each category) is presented. These data are exactly equivalent to the frequency data except in the "ask for date" category, where percentages for number of subjects asking for at least one date, and percentages for number of dates over total possible, are presented separately.

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Put Table 1 about here

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The data in Table 1 indicate that of the fourteen appropriate comparisons, twelve are in the predicted direction. Within the high self-esteem conditions romantic behavior is greater with the highly

attractive confederate than with the moderately attractive confederate for all categories but one (asking for information). Within the low self-esteem conditions romantic behavior tends to be greater with the moderately attractive confederate than with the highly attractive confederate for all categories but one (offering to buy). These single comparisons are not significantly different by themselves, but the over-all consistency of the results for different romantic behaviors seems to provide some additional confidence in our hypothesis.

### Discussion

Our results indicate that self-esteem will effect the extent to which people choose romantic partners who are similar to themselves in social desirability; that low self-esteem will lead to choice of a similar partner but high self-esteem will lead to choice of a dissimilar, more attractive, partner. We interpret these results as meaning, not that high self-esteem persons are less "realistic" or "practical", but rather that high self-esteem changes what the person believes is a realistic or practical choice. Thus, persons at various levels of self-esteem should be concerned with the chances of getting an attractive romantic partner, and do not wish to behave unrealistically. But who is chosen as a "realistic" romantic partner depends on perceptions of the self as they affect perceptions of the partner. If the perception of the self is highly positive, as with high self-esteem, the person will compare himself favorably with another whose attributes are highly positive. With that favorable comparison, it is not unrealistic at all to judge the chances of success as high and therefore to choose that highly positive

person as a romantic partner. Conversely, if the perception of self is not so positive, then persons with fewer positive attributes will compare favorably. Person with highly positive attributes will be perceived as being so much more favorable that the chances of success are relatively low. Thus, for those with low self-esteem, the most realistic choice will appear to be that of a person with fewer positive attributes.

Our interpretation of the effect of self-esteem on romantic behavior leans heavily on the assumption that changes in perceptions of the self indirectly affect perceptions of the chances of success or failure (i.e., probable payoff) when making a romantic choice. Thus, we have assumed that if a highly attractive person is perceived as more attractive than oneself, as when one has low self-esteem, then the chances of success with him will be perceived as relatively low. If a highly attractive person is perceived as similar in attractiveness to oneself, as when one has high self-esteem, then the chances of success will be as relatively high. In our study, the perception of probable payoff was free to vary. We assumed that low self-esteem subjects, while they might have wanted to maximize attractiveness of the partner as much as did high self-esteem subjects, did not choose the highly attractive confederate because the chances of success were perceived to be low.

To understand the importance of perceived probable payoff, we only have to imagine what would have happened if, in some way, we could have made subjects believe that choosing the confederate (in all conditions) would not entail any risk of rejection or failure. First, we should find all subjects choosing the high attractive confederate more

than the moderate attractive confederate: maximizing attractiveness without possible failure to consider. But a recent study by Walster (1965) suggests a further difference. That study suggested that low self-esteem persons have a higher need for affection than high self-esteem persons, and moreover, are less demanding of perfection (will rate someone as more attractive than will high self-esteem persons). Thus, their total romantic behavior - given no chance of failure - should be higher than that of high self-esteem persons. The Walster study bears out these predictions. Female subjects, who had already been asked out by a male confederate, liked him more when they had low self-esteem than when they had high self-esteem. In sum, then, we conclude that subjects will "match" themselves with another so that total favorability is equal (as found in the present study), but only when the chances of failure are unknown or known to be relatively high.

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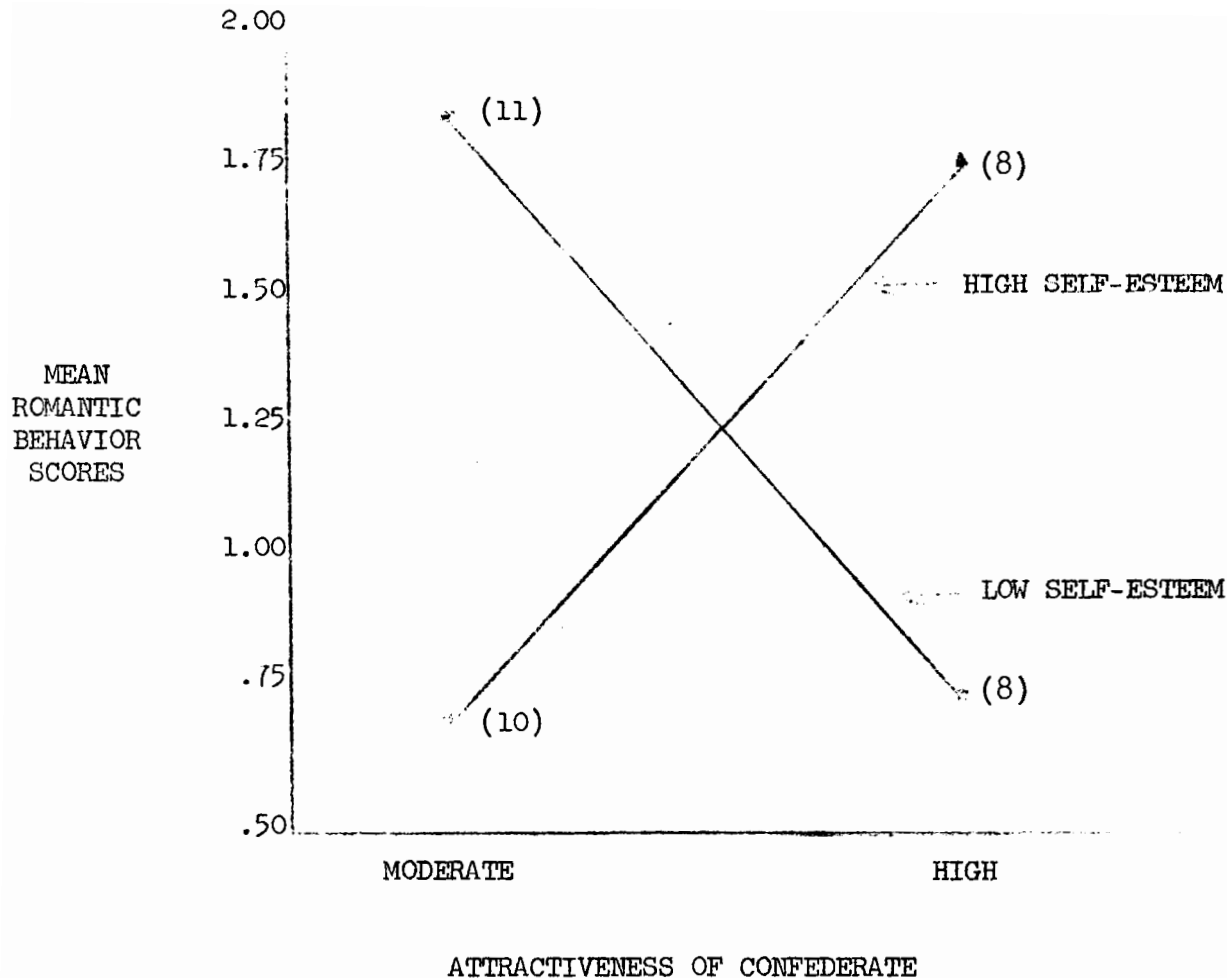


Figure 1.

Mean romantic behavior as a function of subjects' self-esteem and physical attractiveness of their partners. (N's are in parentheses. See text for explanation of scoring.)

Table 1.

Percentage of subjects displaying each type of romantic behavior.

Romantic Behavior	Experimental Condition			
	High self-esteem		Low self-esteem	
	Moderate attractive confederate n=10	High attractive confederate n=8	Moderate attractive confederate n=11	High attractive confederate n=8
Asked for date (% asking for at least one)	20%	25%	36%	25%
Asked for date (% dates of total possible)	10%	19%	27%	13%
Offered to buy coffee, etc.	0%	25%	18%	25%
Offered cigarette, gum, etc. on hand	10%	25%	27%	0%
Expressed compliments	0%	25%	18%	0%
Ignored first cue to leave	10%	25%	45%	12%
Asked for information - phone number, address, etc.	30%	25%	18%	12%