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People Overestimate Their Willingness to Reject Potential Romantic Partners by Overlooking Their Concern for Other People

Samantha Joel[1], Rimma Teper[2], and Geoff MacDonald[1]
[1]University of Toronto and [2]Yale University

Abstract

Mate preferences often fail to correspond with actual mate choices. We present a novel explanation for this phenomenon: People overestimate their willingness to reject unsuitable romantic partners. In two studies, single people were given the opportunity to accept or decline advances from potential dates who were physically unattractive (Study 1) or incompatible with their dating preferences (Study 2). We found that participants were significantly less willing to reject these unsuitable potential dates when they believed the situation to be real rather than hypothetical. This effect was partially explained by other-focused motives: Participants for whom the scenario was hypothetical anticipated less motivation to avoid hurting the potential date's feelings than participants actually felt when they believed the situation to be real. Thus, other-focused motives appear to exert an influence on mate choice that has been overlooked by researchers and laypeople alike.

Keywords

judgment and decision making, mate selection, empathy gap, romantic relationships, dating, rejection, open data, open materials

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The quality of romantic relationships can have a profound influence on people's physical and psychological well-being (e.g., Holt-Lunstad, Birmingham, & Jones, 2008), and people tend to be more satisfied with romantic partners who better meet their ideals (e.g., Eastwick, Luchies, Finkel, & Hunt, 2003). Of course, selecting a suitable partner requires the decision maker to selectively eliminate unsuitable people. Research on mate choice has focused exclusively on self-focused reasons for accepting and rejecting dates, such as mate value (e.g., Buss & Barnes, 1986; Lenton & Francesconi, 2010). This work has generally been based on the assumption that when people are uninterested in a potential suitor, they simply reject that person. However, we propose that rejecting unsuitable potential mates is easier said than done: People wish to avoid inflicting social pain on their potential suitors, and such other-focused concerns can motivate people to accept advances from undesired suitors. Furthermore, we propose that people underestimate the extent to which such other-focused concerns can influence their decisions, so that they are more likely to accept overtures from undesired suitors than they might expect.

A growing body of research suggests that human beings possess strong prosocial tendencies, some of which arise quite intuitively and automatically (e.g., Rand & Nowak, 2013; Righetti, Finkenauer, & Finkel, 2013). In the domain of romantic relationships, concerns for the well-being of a partner may be particularly likely to conflict with self-interest. Research on breakups provides indirect evidence that people tend to be quite concerned about causing distress for their ex-partners. Breakup initiators worry about being perceived as uncaring or cruel (Perilloux & Buss, 2008),

Corresponding Author:
Samantha Joel, Department of Psychology, University of Toronto, 100 St. George St., Toronto, Ontario M4Y 3G3, Canada
E-mail: samantha.joel@utoronto.ca

and targets of unrequited love feel guilty about potentially hurting their pursuers (Baumeister, Wotman, & Stillwell, 1993). We propose that these other-focused concerns may interfere with people's ability to make self-interested mate choices: Single individuals may feel compelled to accept advances from undesired potential dates so as to avoid causing those individuals pain.

Although it seems likely that other-focused concerns affect mate-selection decisions, it is also quite possible that people fail to predict the influence that such concerns will have on their behaviors. Past research has shown that people in a "cold," unemotional state tend to underestimate the influence of their emotions when they are in a "hot" state (Loewenstein, 1996). In other words, people have little appreciation for the extent to which emotions may influence their behaviors in the heat of the moment (e.g., Van Boven, Loewenstein, & Dunning, 2005). Recent research suggests that this hot-cold empathy gap may lead people to overestimate their propensity to act in their own interests at the expense of other people (Teper, Inzlicht, & Page-Gould, 2011) and that people may make more prosocial decisions than they anticipate. In the relational context, unanticipated prosocial feelings may act as a barrier to making self-interested decisions, causing people to consider unsuitable potential partners.

We hypothesized that people making decisions about whether to accept or reject a potential romantic partner (and who are presumably therefore in a hot state) are influenced by their desire to avoid causing that person harm. We further hypothesized that people underestimate this source of influence on mate choices because they underestimate how concerned they will feel about hurting the unsuitable potential partner's feelings.

We tested these hypotheses in two studies. In each study, single participants were given the option to accept or reject a potential date in what they believed to be either a hypothetical context or a real-life context. The potential dates were unsuitable either because they were physically unattractive (Study 1) or because they possessed traits that the participants strongly disliked in a mate (Study 2). We predicted that participants would be less willing to reject these unsuitable potential dates in a real-life context because they would feel more strongly influenced by other-focused concerns in a real-life context than in a hypothetical context. These results would suggest not only that people take other people's feelings into consideration when making decisions about whom to date, but also that they underestimate this source of influence when predicting their decisions in the abstract.

Study 1

In Study 1, participants were presented with three dating profiles that ostensibly belonged to other participants in the study. After selecting their preferred profile, participants were given additional information about the person, including a photo that ostensibly showed the person to be unattractive. Participants assigned to the real condition were told that their potential dates were currently in the lab and were available to meet them, whereas participants in the hypothetical condition were asked to imagine that their potential dates were currently in the lab and were available to meet them. Participants were asked whether they would like to exchange contact information with their potential dates. We predicted that participants would be significantly less willing to reject the unattractive potential date when they thought that the scenario was real rather than hypothetical. We tested two potential mediators of this effect: self-focused motives and other-focused motives.

Method

Participants. To be eligible for the study, participants were required to be heterosexual, single, and interested in dating. We ran the study for one academic year and collected as much data as possible during that time. A total of 150 introductory psychology students completed the study. Fifteen participants were excluded because they expressed suspicions about the study, and 3 participants were excluded because they were not single. The final sample consisted of 132 participants (65 male, 64 female, 3 unreported) with an average age of 18.91 years (SD = 1.82, range = 17–33 years).

Materials and procedure. Participants were randomly assigned to either the real condition or the hypothetical condition. For the purposes of this research, we operationalized realism as the belief that the experiment—and particularly decisions made during the experiment—would have real-life consequences. Participants in the real condition were led to believe that they were being given a real opportunity to connect with potential romantic partners, whereas participants in the hypothetical condition were asked only to imagine the experience. Other features were held constant; all participants were told that the potential dates were real people, and no participants actually met any potential dates face-to-face.

All participants were first asked to complete their own dating profile and to provide a photograph of themselves, which we told them we would share with other participants. Next, participants were presented with three completed dating profiles, ostensibly written by other participants. Participants in the real condition were told that these participants were currently in the lab and that they might get to meet one of them. In contrast, participants in the hypothetical condition were told that the other participants were unavailable at that particular time,

so dating profiles had been taken from a previous session. Participants in this condition were asked to imagine that these potential dates were currently in the lab.

Participants selected their favorite profile. Next, they were given a photo of an unattractive person and were told that it was a photo of the person whose profile they had chosen. They were also given a completed questionnaire indicating that the potential date was interested in meeting the participant. The questionnaire included the following critical question: "Are you willing to exchange contact information with this person for the purposes of dating?" Participants in the real condition were told that this questionnaire had actually been filled out by the potential date in response to the participant's own dating information; participants in the hypothetical condition were asked to imagine that the questionnaire had been filled out by the potential date in response to the participant's own dating information.

Participants were next asked to fill out the same questionnaire (i.e., the one that the potential date had filled out and that they had just read). Participants in the real condition were told that their completed questionnaire would be presented to the potential date; those in the hypothetical condition were asked to imagine that their completed questionnaire would be presented to the potential date.

After making their decision to accept or reject the potential date, all participants were asked, "We're curious about why people make the relationship choices that they do. Thinking about your decision of whether or not to exchange contact information with the fellow participant, are there any factors that particularly motivated you to want to meet?" This question was followed by a series of potential reasons for agreeing to exchange contact information with the potential date. Participants were clearly told that their responses to this questionnaire would not be shared with anyone other than the researchers. Four statements represented desire not to hurt the potential date's feelings (i.e., other-focused reasons not to reject the potential date): "I didn't want to hurt my potential date's feelings by turning him/her down," "The idea of refusing made me feel guilty," "I didn't want to make my potential date feel rejected," and "I would have felt bad about turning down my potential date." Four statements represented self-interest in meeting the potential date (i.e., self-focused reasons not to reject the date): "I thought that my potential date and I could make a good match," "I thought that a date with this individual would be fun," "I thought that my potential date and I could be compatible," and "I was looking forward to meeting my potential date." For each statement, participants were asked, "How TRUE was this statement for you?" and then "How much did this MOTIVATE you to agree to meet?" Participants rated the items on 5-point Likert scales (1 = *not at all*, 5 = *extremely*).

A principal component analysis using varimax rotation showed that the eight responses to the self-focused items loaded onto one factor (lowest factor loading = .72), whereas the eight responses to the other-focused items loaded onto a separate factor (lowest factor loading = .71). Overall, eight responses concerned other-focused motives (α = .93), and eight concerned self-focused motives (α = .90). We averaged responses to create a self-focused motives score and an other-focused motives score for each participant.

Finally, participants were asked, "How physically attractive do you consider yourself to be?" and "How physically attractive do you consider your potential date to be?" Participants responded on a 9-point scale (1 = *very unattractive*, 9 = *very attractive*). After the completion of the questionnaires, participants were probed for suspicion and then fully debriefed.

Results

We first sought to confirm that participants indeed viewed the potential date as unattractive. A paired-samples *t* test indicated that participants found the potential date (M = 4.48) to be significantly less attractive than themselves (M = 6.08), $t(103) = 6.77$, $p < .001$. We next tested our primary hypothesis that participants would be more reluctant to reject the unattractive date when they believed the situation to be real rather than hypothetical. Only 10 of the 61 participants in the hypothetical condition chose to exchange contact information with the unattractive potential date (16%). In contrast, 26 of the 71 participants in the real condition chose to exchange contact information (37%). A chi-square test of independence indicated that participants were significantly less likely to reject the unattractive potential date in the real condition compared with the hypothetical condition, $\chi^2(1, N = 132) = 6.77$, $p = .009$.

We examined potential effects of the experimental manipulation (real condition vs. hypothetical condition) on participants' self-reported motives regarding their decision. Results of a Wilks's lambda multivariate analysis of variance (ANOVA) were significant, $F(2, 129) = 4.85$, $p = .009$, $\eta_p^2 = .07$. Table 1 presents results for the motive measures. The manipulation significantly affected participants' other-focused and self-focused motives for exchanging contact information. Participants felt more concerned about hurting the potential date's feelings, as well as more genuinely interested in meeting the potential date, when they believed the scenario to be real rather than hypothetical.

ANOVA results suggest that both other-focused concerns and self-focused concerns may help to explain why participants were less willing to reject potential partners in the real condition compared with the hypothetical

Table 1. Results From Study 1: Impact of Experimental Condition on Motives for Accepting the Potential Date

	Hypothetical condition		Real condition				
Type of motive	*M*	*SD*	*M*	*SD*	$F(1, 130)$	p	η_p^2
Other-focused	2.62	1.00	3.12	1.05	7.82	.006	.06
Self-focused	2.21	0.71	2.50	0.79	4.77	.03	.04

condition. We tested both of these potential mechanisms using a bootstrap analysis (Preacher & Hayes, 2008). Condition (hypothetical vs. real) was entered as the predictor. Other-focused and self-focused motives were entered as simultaneous mediators. Decision to reject the date (no vs. yes) was entered as the dependent variable. As predicted, other-focused motives significantly mediated participants' lower likelihood of rejecting the potential date in the real condition compared with the hypothetical condition. In addition, self-focused motives marginally mediated the relation between experimental condition and rejection decision (see Table 2 and Fig. 1). Overall, then, participants assigned to the real condition reported being more motivated to exchange contact information with the potential date for both self- and other-focused reasons, and each type of reason independently helped to explain why participants in the real condition were more likely to agree to exchange information than were those in the hypothetical condition. These effects held when we controlled for gender, and they were not moderated by gender.[1]

Discussion

These results suggest that people overestimate their own willingness to reject potential dating partners. When participants were asked to imagine being confronted with an unattractive potential date, the large majority (84%) anticipated that they would reject that individual. However, when participants were presented with this dilemma in what they believed to be a real situation, only 63% actually rejected the unattractive potential date.

Table 2. Results From Study 1: Analysis of Motives as Mediators of the Effect of Experimental Condition (Real vs. Hypothetical) on the Decision to Reject the Potential Date

Type of motive	Point estimate of indirect effect	*SE*	BCa 95% CI
Other-focused	–0.2928	0.2059	[–0.7994, –0.0111]
Self-focused	–0.5076	0.3247	[–1.2404, 0.0140]
Total	–0.8005	0.4064	[–1.6751, –0.1533]

Note: BCa 95% CI = bias-corrected and accelerated 95% confidence interval, based on 5,000 bootstrap samples.

This effect was partly explained by self-focused motives: Participants in the real condition were more genuinely interested in meeting the potential date than participants in the hypothetical condition imagined that they would be. However, the effects were also partially explained by other-focused motives, above and beyond the effects of self-focused motives. Participants in the real condition were more concerned about hurting their potential date's feelings than participants in the hypothetical condition expected that they would be, which in turn led fewer people to reject the potential date in the real condition compared with the hypothetical condition.

Study 2

Study 1 provided evidence that people overestimate their willingness to reject potential partners and that this effect is partially driven by other-focused motives. However, it is possible that this effect is unique to physical attractiveness. In Study 2, we explored whether the effect would generalize to contexts in which potential dates are undesirable because of their habits or traits rather than their lack of physical attractiveness. The methodology of Study 2 was similar to that of Study 1, except that instead of presenting participants with photos of unattractive potential dates, we presented them with additional information suggesting that their chosen dates were incompatible with the participants. We obtained prior reports from participants about "deal-breaker" traits that would lead them to reject potential dating partners (e.g., opposing religious or political views), and we tailored the profile information so that it contained those person-specific deal-breaker traits. We expected that, as in Study 1, participants who were told that this situation was only hypothetical would be significantly more willing to reject the potential partner than would participants who believed the situation was real. We predicted that this effect would be mediated by stronger motivation to avoid hurting the potential partner's feelings in the real condition than in the hypothetical condition.

Method

Participants. To be eligible for the study, participants were required to be heterosexual, single, and interested

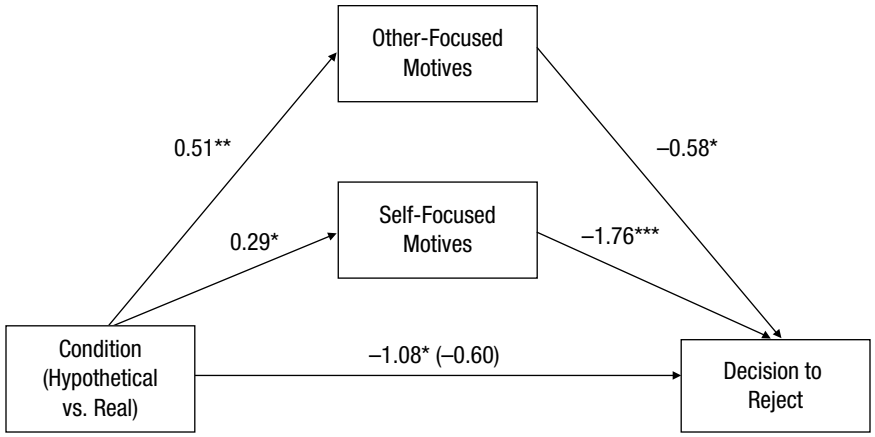

Fig. 1. Results from Study 1: self- and other-focused motives as mediators of the effect of the experimental condition on the decision to reject the date. On the path from experimental condition (real vs. hypothetical) to decision to reject the date, the value outside parentheses is from the model without the mediators, and the value in parentheses is from the model that included the mediators. All values are unstandardized regression coefficients (*p < .05, **p < .01, ***p < .001).

in dating. As in Study 1, we ran the study for one academic year and collected as much data as possible during that time. A total of 134 introductory psychology students completed the study. Two were excluded because they were not single, 2 because they were not interested in dating, 12 because they had not provided any deal-breaker traits before participation, 16 because they expressed suspicions about the study, and 3 because they failed to respond to the key dependent measure. The final sample consisted of 99 participants (31 male, 68 female) with an average age of 19.18 years (SD = 1.76, range = 17–30 years). Participants were randomly assigned to either the real condition or the hypothetical condition.

Materials and procedure. Before the laboratory session, participants completed a questionnaire about their dating preferences. The items were included in a larger package of questionnaires distributed to all introductory psychology students. Students were asked if they would ever consider dating a person who had any of 14 potential deal-breaker traits (e.g., being very religious, being an atheist). They responded either "yes" or "no" to each item; a "no" response indicated that a particular trait was a deal-breaker.

Students were later recruited to participate in our lab experiment on "dating experiences." They first completed their own dating profiles as well as a sheet of additional information about themselves, which we told them we would share with other participants. They were next presented with three completed profiles, all of which included some basic information (e.g., age, academic major). Participants were led to believe either that the students from these profiles were currently in the lab (real condition) or that they were from a previous session (hypothetical condition). Participants chose their favorite profiles. Next, they were given a sheet of additional personal information that had ostensibly been filled out by their chosen potential date. These sheets were in fact adapted by the experimenter for each participant to include three of the participant's previously indicated deal-breaker traits. For example, if a participant indicated in the initial questionnaire that he or she would never date a very liberal person, the personal information sheet indicated that the potential date's political views were "very liberal." As in Study 1, each participant was also given a completed questionnaire indicating that the potential date would like to meet him or her. Participants were told that these responses were written by the potential date (real condition), or they were asked to imagine that the responses were written by the potential date (hypothetical condition).

As in Study 1, participants completed the same questionnaire, which included the question about their willingness to contact the potential date. Participants were told that their responses would be presented to the potential date (real condition) or were asked to imagine that they would be presented to the potential date (hypothetical condition).

Using the 16 questions from Study 1, all participants next rated other-focused (α = .93) and self-focused (α = .93) factors that may have motivated them to exchange contact information with their potential date. As in Study 1, a principal component analysis using varimax rotation showed that the eight responses to the self-focused items loaded onto one factor (lowest factor loading = .72), whereas the eight responses to the other-focused items loaded onto a separate factor (lowest factor loading = .71). We averaged responses to create a self-focused motives

Table 3. Results From Study 2: Impact of Experimental Condition on Motives for Accepting the Potential Date

	Hypothetical condition		Real condition				
Type of motive	*M*	*SD*	*M*	*SD*	$F(1, 97)$	p	η_p^2
Other-focused	3.70	1.42	4.49	1.45	7.39	.008	.07
Self-focused	3.81	1.41	4.03	1.14	0.70	.41	.007

score and an other-focused motives score for each participant. After the participants completed the questionnaires, they were probed for suspicion and fully debriefed.

Results

We first examined whether participants' willingness to reject the incompatible potential dates differed on the basis of whether they believed the situation to be real or hypothetical. We found that 24 of the 52 participants in the hypothetical condition chose to exchange contact information with the potential date (46%), whereas 35 of the participants in the real condition chose to exchange contact information (74%). A test of independence indicated that participants in the real condition were significantly less likely to reject the unattractive potential date than were participants in the hypothetical condition, $\chi^2(1, N = 99) = 8.22$, $p = .004$. These results replicate those of Study 1.

We next examined whether the experimental manipulation (real condition vs. hypothetical condition) affected participants' self-reported motives for their choices. Results of a Wilks's lambda multivariate ANOVA were significant, $F(2, 96) = 3.71$, $p = .03$, $\eta_p^2 = .07$. Table 3 presents results for motives measures. As in Study 1, the experimental manipulation significantly affected participants' other-focused motives. Participants in the real conditions were more concerned about hurting their potential dates' feelings than were participants in the hypothetical condition. However, unlike in Study 1, the experimental manipulation did not affect participants' self-focused motives: Their belief about the scenario (i.e., real or hypothetical) had no effect on their genuine interest in meeting the potential date.

We used a bootstrap analysis with 5,000 samples to test whether other-focused motives was a mediator of the effect of condition (hypothetical vs. real) on decision to reject the date (no vs. yes). We found that other-focused motives marginally mediated this association between condition and outcome, partially explaining why participants in the real condition were less willing to reject their potential dates than were participants in the hypothetical condition (Fig. 2). The point estimate of the indirect effect was –0.20 ($SE = 0.15$), with a bias-corrected and accelerated 95% confidence interval of –0.57 to 0.04. This effect held when we controlled for gender, and it was not moderated by gender.

Discussion

Study 1 showed that people overestimate their willingness to reject unattractive potential dates. Study 2 expanded on this finding, showing that people similarly overestimate their willingness to reject incompatible potential dates.

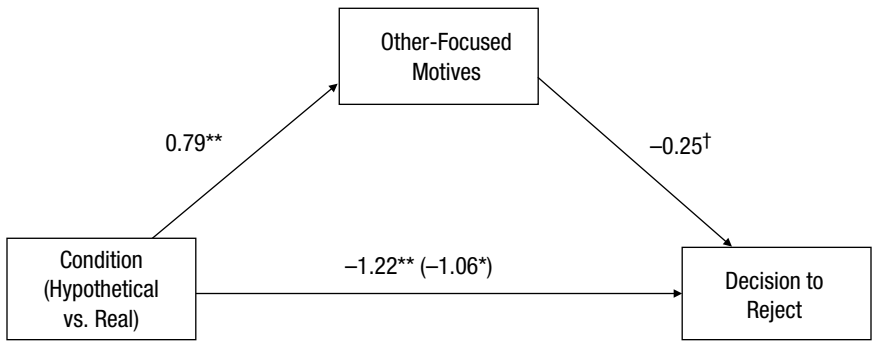

Fig. 2. Results from Study 2: other-focused motives as a mediator of the effect of the experimental condition on the decision to reject the date. On the path from experimental condition (real vs. hypothetical) to decision to reject the date, the value outside parentheses is from the model without the mediator, and the value in parentheses is from the model that included the mediator. All values are unstandardized regression coefficients (†$p < .10$, *$p < .05$, **$p < .01$).

Less than half of participants who were presented with hypothetical potential dates—who ostensibly possessed three different deal-breaker traits—accepted a date. However, when participants were told that these potential dates were currently in the lab, 74% of participants were willing to exchange contact information.

Furthermore, when participants only imagined choosing whether to reject an incompatible potential date, they underestimated how concerned they would feel about hurting the potential date's feelings. As in Study 1, we found that other-focused motives explained why people overestimated their willingness to reject the incompatible date. Unlike in Study 1, however, self-focused motives did not differ significantly between conditions.

General Discussion

This research shows that rejecting an unsuitable potential romantic partner is easier said than done. People overestimated their willingness to reject undesirable potential partners who were physically unattractive (Study 1) or who possessed traits that were incompatible with their own preferences (Study 2). These effects were partially explained by other-focused motives: People failed to anticipate their desire to avoid hurting the potential date's feelings.

A growing body of work shows that people's stated mate preferences do not correspond well with their actual mate choices (e.g., Eastwick & Finkel, 2008; Todd, Penke, Fasolo, & Lenton, 2007). The present research presents a novel explanation for this phenomenon: Mate choices may be based in part on concern for the potential partner's feelings, and such concerns may lead decision makers to accept dates with individuals who do not meet their stated preferences. In accordance with the hot-cold empathy gap (Loewenstein, 1996), people fail to anticipate the extent to which other-focused concerns influence their mate choices. Thus, people are more willing to reject unsuitable potential partners in the abstract than they are in reality.

Future research should examine the boundary conditions of these effects. How far might people be willing to go to accommodate undesirable suitors? The motivation to spare a suitor's feelings may lessen as the cost of doing so increases. The potential partner's flaws may become more salient as the relationship develops, leading the decision maker to conclude that the opportunity costs of continuing to accommodate this person are too great. Conversely, other-focused motives, such as empathy, tend to become stronger as the decision maker becomes closer to the target, both geographically and psychologically (e.g., Loewenstein & Small, 2007). Thus, continued investment in the relationship may make a person more, rather than less, motivated to avoid hurting his or her partner.

Our research further shows that, above and beyond the approach-based reason of being genuinely interested in a potential date, the avoidance-based reason of not wanting to hurt the person's feelings can motivate people to accept romantic advances. This is notable given that avoidance motives tend to be both personally and relationally detrimental (Impett, Gable, & Peplau, 2005). Future research should examine the costs associated with accepting advances to avoid hurting the person's feelings.

In the present studies, participants made their decision to accept or reject the date before answering the questionnaire about their self- and other-focused motives. It is possible that the responses to the questionnaire items represent post hoc explanations of participants' decisions, rather than participants' true motives. However, studies on self-justification suggest that people tend to justify their decisions as being intrinsically good decisions, rather than admit that they were acquiescing to the desires of other people (e.g., Festinger, 1957; Rasinski, Geers, & Czopp, 2013). Therefore, self-justification should favor endorsement of self-focused motives (i.e., "If I agreed to go on a date with this person, he must be desirable after all"), rather than other-focused motives. In the present studies, other-focused motives had effects above and beyond the effects of self-focused motives, which suggests that the effects of other-focused motives are unlikely to be the result of self-justification.

Overall, the present research identifies other-focused motives as a previously overlooked source of influence on mate choice. These findings suggest that people can feel motivated to accept overtures from unsuitable potential partners because they do not want to hurt those individuals. However, people do not anticipate these other-focused concerns in the abstract, so they overestimate their willingness to reject unsuitable potential partners.

Author Contributions

S. Joel and R. Teper developed the study concept. All authors contributed to the study design. S. Joel collected, analyzed, and interpreted the data under the supervision of G. MacDonald. S. Joel drafted the manuscript, and R. Teper and G. MacDonald provided revisions. All authors approved the final version of the manuscript for submission.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The authors declared that they had no conflicts of interest with respect to their authorship or the publication of this article.

Open Practices

All data and materials have been made publicly available via the Open Science Framework and can be accessed at https://osf.io/873fp/. The complete Open Practices Disclosure for this

article can be found at http://pss.sagepub.com/content/by/supplemental-data. This article has received badges for Open Data and Open Materials. More information about the Open Practices badges can be found at https://osf.io/tvyxz/wiki/view/ and http://pss.sagepub.com/content/25/1/3.full.

Note

1. Although factor analyses suggested that our scale for other-focused motives assessed a single construct, two of the four statements arguably had an element of self-focus (i.e., "The idea of refusing made me feel guilty," and "I would have felt bad about turning down my potential date"). Analyses (available on request) in which these relatively self-oriented items were removed from the composite score showed that the remaining other-focused items still mediated the effect of condition on decision to reject the date in both studies.

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