Biological markets: A paradigm for understanding human relationships

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Biological markets work on the premise that natural selection should favor individuals who choose, and spend the most time with, partners that provide the most net benefits. In choosing partners that maximize net benefits gained, we attend to two distinct traits (a) *ability* to provide benefits, and (b) *willingness* to share such benefits. People should prefer partners who signal *increasing levels of willingness* because the ability to provide resources is irrelevant without a tendency to share. On the contrary, people should prefer those with *similar, but slightly higher, levels of abilities* to themselves. This is because such partners allow a net gain across the reciprocal exchange while decreasing the risks of rejection and/or exploitation from those with much higher levels of abilities. I tested several predictions related to this logic. Participants rated themselves and preferred long-term relationship partners (i.e., friends, roommates, business partners, and romantic partners) on several ability and willingness traits. Preliminary analyses revealed four patterns of results: (1) Willingness and ability ratings for preferred partners were higher than self-ratings for the same traits; (2) willingness traits for preferred partners were rated higher than ability traits; (3) self-ratings for willingness traits were higher than ability traits; and (4) increasing levels of willingness traits and moderate levels of ability traits were preferred for friends and roommates, but not business and romantic partners. These findings suggest there are similarities in preferences for different long-term relationship partners.