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Mate Dollars

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Synonyms

Budget allocation task; Mate budget

Definition

Mate dollars (Li et al., 2002) are a hypothetical currency utilized in self-report experiments investigating human mate preferences. Participants are given a fixed number of mate dollars to spend across a finite number of traits to "purchase" their ideal partner – sometimes called a budget-allocation task. The more mate dollars a participant spends on any given trait, the higher their ideal partner will be on that trait. But the more mate dollars that are spent on any given trait, the fewer mate dollars the participant has left to spend on other traits. The application of mate dollars to self-reported mating preferences, therefore, is designed to invoke trade-offs across multiple desired traits.

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Mate dollars were first conceived as a mechanism to apply constraints to participants' self-reported mate preferences. Other methods of measuring mate preferences typically involve independent ratings of a series of traits, to determine which traits are most valued in prospective partners. Such ratings, however, are vulnerable to unrealistic inflation. Participants provide independent ratings of the importance of each trait in a partner (or the level of each trait they desire in a partner) and so are unconstrained in the overall quality of the hypothetical mate their preferences indicate they want. In the real world, the various desirable partner traits cannot be chosen independently but come already bundled together. In choosing prospective partners, people are actually choosing combinations of traits. Trade-offs are thus an inherent part of mate choice decisions. A person's "ideal" partner may be very wealthy, very attractive, and very kind and loyal. But unless such a high value prospective mate exists and is attainable, that person will most likely need to choose which of their desired traits are most important, and which they are prepared to compromise on. A series of independent ratings may well reflect someone's ideal partner, but it might be less informative of the trade-offs a person makes between their desired traits when actually choosing mates.

Trait ratings tasks may also fail to accurately reveal either the relative or absolute importance of

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traits in mate choice. As Li et al. (2002) explained when outlining the utility of the mate dollars paradigm, in a standard trait ratings task, a participant may rate physical attractiveness as low in importance because when making real-life mate choice decisions between potential suitors, physical attractiveness does not influence their decisions very much. However, this same person may have minimum standards of physical attractiveness, such that someone who does not meet these minimum standards would not even be perceived as a potential suitor. Even though physical attractiveness may not figure in any direct suitor versus suitor comparisons, an opposite sex individual falling below the minimum acceptable attractiveness threshold would be rejected, regardless of how many other highly desired traits they possessed. In such a case, physical attractiveness clearly is a key determinant of mate choice, even though the participant may accurately report that they barely consider it when evaluating someone they have deemed to be a potential suitor.

The notion of there being minimum acceptable standards for some traits, but not others, invokes the concept of necessities versus luxuries. Economically, necessities are those items of which some minimum amount is always required. Necessities also tend to exhibit diminishing returns. Once the minimum required amount has been attained, additional necessities have little use. Luxuries are those items we would like to have but would only purchase if the budget permitted it, once sufficient amounts of all necessities had been already bought. The original mate dollars paradigm (Li et al., 2002) and most applications of it since have provided participants with lower and higher budgets, respectively, with which to purchase their desired partner characteristics. As with the example above involving physical attractiveness, traits are deemed necessities in mate dollar paradigms when participants purchase a certain amount of the trait when their budget is low, but tend to spend decreasing proportions of their budget on those traits as the budget increases. Luxuries exhibit the opposite pattern. They tend not to feature at all when budgets are constrained, but occupy increasing proportions of the budget as constraints lift. Relying on these definitions, mate dollar paradigms have revealed that men and women view physical attractiveness and resources, respectively, as necessities in prospective partners.

A number of studies have utilized mate dollars as a methodological tool to investigate mating preferences and priorities across a range of contexts. These include sex differences in short-term and long-term mating preferences (Li & Kenrick, 2006), correlations between personality and mating preferences (Jonason et al., 2011, 2012), the impacts of environmental cues, such as pathogen prevalence and resource scarcity, on mate preferences (Lee & Zietsch, 2011), the impacts of mate-value on mate preferences (Edlund & Sagarin, 2010), and cross-cultural mate preference comparisons (Li et al., 2011; Thomas et al., 2020). Budget allocation tasks have also been adapted beyond the mate preference context to investigate desired traits in leaders (Nichols & Cottrell, 2014) and in university teachers (Goldman et al., 2017).

Cross-References

- ▶ Mate value
- ▶ Mate preference

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