Twitter Thread by Darwin Does Dating

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Today on Darwin Does Dating. Love may be blind but it stills sees quite well. Surely that's a contradiction? How we evolved to doublethink about our partners. A thread! [1/15]



When judging the qualities of our partner, people tend to see the best in them, thinking of them as smarter, sexier, and funnier than they really are. Relationship psychologists call this “mean level bias”. We see our partner through rose tinted glasses.■■[2/15]

At the same time, people tend to have a really accurate view of the relative strengths and weaknesses of their partner. They’re able to recognize when they are stronger than they are funnier, smarter than patient, and so on. This is often called “tracking accuracy”. [3/15]

So, there’s an elephant in the room here■. People appear to both hold accurate and inaccurate views of their significant other. A bit reminiscent of Orwell’s “doublethink” in 1984 - the idea that people can learn to sit comfortably with contradiction in their heads. [4/15]

Dig deeper and we find that these two judgments appear to have different functions in relationships. Let’s start with mean-level bias. First of all, it’s quite variable, and much larger among those satisfied with their relationships (at least in the early stages). [5/15]

Second, it can go in the other direction, people tend to *underestimate* their partners level of commitment to the relationship, for example. Third, people are able to overcome their mean-level bias. [6/15]

Ask them “how would your friends answer this question about your partner?” and they give more accurate answers. Finally, there’s a small sex difference, women appear *slightly* more biased than men. [7/15]

Tracking accuracy, in contrast, is consistent – people are great at tracking their partner’s strengths and weaknesses. But, it doesn’t seem to influence relationship satisfaction, there’s little sex difference, and doesn’t change when people adopt a different perspective. [8/15]

Mean-level bias is fluid and malleable■, while tracking accuracy seems solid ■. And importantly, the accuracy in one doesn’t relate to the other. Again, showing how these are two very different things. [9/15]

OK, so what gives? How to we reconcile the contradiction? An evolutionary perspective can help here by encouraging us to think about what the functions of mean-level bias and tracking accuracy might be in relationship formation and maintenance. [10/15]

Mean-level bias appears to help maintain relationships and signal commitment. Seeing your partner as the “bees knees” might make you feel like you have a good deal, want to maintain your relationships, and not be tempted by alternatives.■[11/15]

Tracking accuracy, in contrast, acts as a safety net■. Knowing someone’s strengths and weaknesses is important for choosing a partner who both complements you and will work will with you as part of a team.■[12/15]

In fact, we find that tracking accuracy is the *most* accurate for traits that have had the most impact on relationship functioning and success over the course of human history■. Things like kindness, physical attractiveness, and social status. [13/15]

Together, we have balance. One maintains and deepens relationships. The other guards us from poor mate choices. A potential implication: If in a new committed relationship with a partner who doesn’t seem to see you through “rose tinted lenses” – this might be a red flag.■[14/15]

If you’d like to know more about mean-level bias and tracking accuracy, there is an excellent meta-analysis by Fletcher and Kerr which inspired this thread. Link to that below. (Free through ResearchGate.) Until next time. [15/15]
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