

What Namibian Nomads Can Teach Us About Relationships (M)



People say they want someone more attractive than themselves, but this is not the key to a successful relationship.

People of a similar level of desirability are more likely to pair up and have a successful relationship than those who are mismatched in desirability.

The findings come from an anthropological study of Namibian semi-nomads.

Although people say they want someone more attractive than themselves, in reality they often end up with someone who has a similar 'mate value' to themselves.

Mate value refers to the sum of all traits that are perceived as desirable — these include appearance, wealth, age, personality and social status.

The key to this research was that it was based on people's actions: who they chose to pair up with.

In contrast, much research in this area simply asks people their preferences.

Dr Sean Prall, the study's first author, said:

"We were interested in this because much of the anthropological work on human mating patterns are based on only people's preferences.

This research focuses on people's actions.

Sure, you might say you'd prefer someone that's deemed really desirable, but that's heavily impacted by societal norms.

What do you do in that relationship?

How does it actually go?

That was what we were looking at."

Himba people

Dr Prall has been studying the Himba people for five years.

Along with Professor Brooke Scelza, they have visited Namibia to study these semi-nomadic pastoralists for a month each summer.

The Himba people have special qualities — partly lost to modern societies — that make them interesting to study, said Dr Prall:

"This was a great population to look at these questions because everyone knows each other and most date and marry within the population.

You can ask them how much they'd like to be in a relationship with a specific person because they actually know that person.

That's how people have been partnering up for thousands and thousands of years, not online, but with people in your community."

While much of their research is specific to this traditional society, their findings about relationship preferences are likely to be more universal.

For example, research on relationships finds that people look for [equality in their partners](#), even [people who resemble them physically](#).

People's relationships also tend to be more successful when they are more similar.

Opposites are both unlikely to attract and unlikely to stay together.

What most people end up with — even if they aspire to better things — is someone quite similar to themselves.

Fortunately, this is best for all concerned.

The study was published in the journal *Science Advances* ([Prall & Scelz, 2022](#)).