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Mate Evaluation Theory

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There are two unresolved puzzles in the literature examining how people evaluate mates (i.e., prospective or current romantic/sexual partners). First, compatibility is theoretically crucial, but attempts to explain why certain perceivers are compatible with certain targets have revealed small effects. Second, features of partners (e.g., personality, consensually rated attributes) affect perceivers' evaluations strongly in initial-attraction contexts but weakly in established relationships. Mate Evaluation Theory (MET) addresses these puzzles, beginning with the Social Relations Model postulate that all evaluative constructs (e.g., attraction, relationship satisfaction) consist of target, perceiver, and relationship variance. MET then explains how people draw evaluations from mates' attributes using four information sources: (a) shared evolved mechanisms and cultural scripts (*common lens*, which produces target variance); (b) individual differences that affect how a perceiver views all targets (*perceiver lens*, which produces perceiver variance); (c) individual differences that affect how a perceiver views some targets, depending on the targets' features (*feature lens*, which produces some relationship variance); and (d) narratives about and idiosyncratic reactions to one particular target (*target-specific lens*, which produces most relationship variance). These two distinct sources of relationship variance (i.e., feature vs. target-specific) address Puzzle #1: Previous attempts to explain compatibility used feature lens information, but relationship variance likely derives primarily from the (understudied) target-specific lens. MET also addresses Puzzle #2 by suggesting that repeated interaction causes the target-specific lens to expand, which reduces perceivers' use of the common lens. We conclude with new predictions and implications at the intersection of the human-mating and person-perception literatures.

Keywords: close relationships, initial attraction, evolutionary psychology, person perception, social cognition

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Evaluation is central to the way people think about other people (Osgood et al., 1957; Smith & Collins, 2009; Zajonc, 1980). It is also a primary driver of behavior—"liking is for doing" (Ferguson & Bargh, 2004; Katz, 1960). Thus, for millennia, humans have attempted to spend time, form bonds, and initiate sexual intimacy with people whom they evaluate positively rather than negatively (Fletcher et al., 2015). This article describes Mate Evaluation Theory (MET), which depicts the psychological processes by which people generate *evaluations* (valenced judgments, such as romantic desire or relationship satisfaction) of prospective and current *mates* (romantic and/or sexual partners; see the Appendix for key terms).

Nearly all models and theories in the close relationships tradition have an evaluative component, positing a role for relationship satisfaction, commitment, or similarly valenced judgments about the partner and/or relationship (e.g., Karney & Bradbury, 1995; Murray et al., 2006; Rusbult, 1980). Some evolutionary models also carve out a central role for these variables (e.g., Conroy-Beam, 2021; Fletcher et al., 2015; Gonzaga et al., 2008; Kenrick et al., 2010), and many others generate predictions about the traits and features that would cause a person to be evaluated positively as a mate (Buss, 1989; Buss & Schmitt, 1993; Grammer & Thornhill, 1994; Kenrick & Keefe, 1992; Singh, 1993). However, a significant limitation of all these models is that they are not tightly connected to basic research on evaluation in the person perception and social-cognitive literatures—specifically the Social Relations Model (SRM; Kenny, 2020) and related research on the way that people generate evaluations from semantic concepts (e.g., traits, intentions; Amodio, 2019; Peabody, 1967; Schneid et al., 2015). By drawing from these disparate knowledge bases, MET offers unique insights about the psychological processes that produce positive or negative feelings about a mate and inspires new predictions regarding key mating-relevant topics.

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Two Puzzles in the Human Mating Literature

MET was designed to account for two puzzles in the literature on human mating. First, compatibility seems like it should be an essential feature of close relationships, but attempts to account for compatibility using attribute-matching models (e.g., ideal partner preference-matching, similarity-matching) tend to exhibit small effect sizes. Second, *partner effects* (e.g., the association of a target's personality with a perceiver's evaluation of him/her) tend to be large in initial-attraction contexts but small in established relationships. We briefly summarize the evidence bearing on these two puzzles below.

In practice, the literature tends to carve up relationship trajectories into different segments; some studies examine initial attraction during brief face-to-face interactions between strangers (e.g., Montoya et al., 2018), whereas others examine established couples (e.g., Karney & Bradbury, 1995; Le et al., 2010). In the sections that follow, we generally discuss studies on initial attraction separately from studies on established couples. This narrative device might give the reader the impression that initial attraction and established relationships are discrete relationship stages, but they are better conceptualized as segments with diffuse boundaries superimposed on continuous evaluative arcs (Eastwick et al., 2019b).

Puzzle #1: Compatibility Is Broadly Theorized to Be Crucial . . .

Compatibility refers to the idea that two partners are well coordinated and have unique value to each other (Eastwick & Hunt, 2014; Fitzsimons et al., 2015; Glenn, 2002; Ickes, 1985; Murray & Holmes, 2009; Sprecher, 2011; Reis et al., 2021). The importance of compatibility derives from evolutionary frameworks suggesting that pair-bonding, attachment, and romantic love facilitated reproductive success in Homo sapiens (Fletcher et al., 2015; Frank, 1988; Hazan & Diamond, 2000; Hazan & Shaver, 1994; Stewart-Williams & Thomas, 2013). Human offspring are exceptionally helpless when young, and their energetically costly brains require considerable provisioning, even compared with our closest primate relatives (Hrdy, 2009). One solution to this adaptive problem was the evolution of pair-bonding in the hominid lineage approximately 1.5–2 million years ago (Eastwick, 2009; Fraley et al., 2005; Gray & Anderson, 2010). When pair-bonded, hominid fathers became more likely to join mothers in providing food, shelter, and protection for their children, and they could serve as an imitative model to help children acquire important life skills (Hewlett, 1992; Lovejoy, 1981; Marlowe, 2003). Importantly, members of other pair-bonding species appear to select partners on the basis of compatibility (e.g., California mice, Gleason et al., 2012; zebra finches, Ihle et al., 2015).

Evolutionary theories of interdependence (Balliet et al., 2017; Roth et al., 2021) and mutual courtship (Eibl-Eibesfeldt, 1989; Stewart-Williams & Thomas, 2013) highlight why compatibility may be essential to highly interdependent human pair-bonded partners. Partners will at times face situations that call for skill and ability (e.g., *competence* in high need-for-coordination situations), and they will at other times face situations that call for honesty and cooperativeness (e.g., *warmth* in high conflict-of-interest situations; see also Kelley, 1983). Courtship should have allowed potential romantic partners the time to sample different interdependence situations and assess whether they can exhibit these traits with each other when working together—can you take charge of one task when I need to handle a different task, and can I trust you when I need to be vulnerable? From this perspective, it is important not just that you are competent and warm in general but also that you are competent and warm *with me* (Chen et al., 2006). Related perspectives suggest that partners build and/or discover compatibility by acquiring insight into their partner's needs, goals, aspirations, and preferences via repeated interaction (Feeney & Collins, 2015; Finkel et al., 2014; Lakey & Orehek, 2011; Reis et al., 2021), and partners are also motivated to make themselves irreplaceable (Murray et al., 2009).

Empirically speaking—as we explain in "The Social Relations Model" section—compatibility operationalized as "relationship variance" is the largest source of variance in romantic judgments (Kenny, 2020). Furthermore, people's lay intuitions suggest that compatibility is critically important when selecting a partner: When participants describe what would make someone have high mate value, the single most common free-response is "compatibility" (Eastwick & Hunt, 2014).

. . . but the Most Common (Attribute-Matching) Tests of Compatibility Reveal Small Effects

Empirically explaining why some partnerships are more compatible than others has proven challenging, however. Many popular compatibility hypotheses draw from *attribute-matching* concepts: The idea that features of perceivers (e.g., perceivers' desire for a physically attractive partner) in conjunction with features of targets (e.g., targets' physical attractiveness) should predict positive evaluations. But as discussed presently, romantic evaluations are not well explained using "certain types of people evaluate certain other types of people positively" statistical models. Small effects can be theoretically valuable and practically important in many contexts (Funder & Ozer, 2019; Prentice & Miller, 1992). But in this case, it is challenging to square the idea that compatibility is central to human pair-bonding with the idea that attribute-matching effects on evaluations are cumulatively modest.

The effect of ideal partner-preference matching on romantic evaluations is one example of an attribute-matching test of compatibility: For example, people who believe that their ideal partner is "intelligent" should be especially likely to positively evaluate intelligent (vs. unintelligent) partners—a Perceiver-preference × Partner-trait interaction. Such interaction tests of ideal partner-preference matching on romantic evaluations tend to be quite small, regardless of whether participants are evaluating new acquaintances (e.g., after a first date, in a laboratory interaction, on a speed-date) or current romantic partners (Eastwick et al., 2011, in press; Eastwick & Finkel, 2008; Eastwick, Luchies, et al., 2014; Lam et al., 2016; Sparks et al., 2020; Wu et al., 2018; Valentine et al., 2020; but see Fletcher et al., 2020). In other words, the extent to which perceivers positively evaluate intelligent (vs. unintelligent) targets is only weakly tied to individual differences in the perceiver's ideal preference for intelligence in a partner. A reasonable cumulative estimate of the effect size of ideal partner-preference matching across all mating-relevant attributes is $r = .10$[1]—perhaps

[1] Critically, this is a cumulative estimate of ideal partner-preference matching effects (a) above and beyond the "normative desirability confound" (for tutorials, see Rogers et al., 2018; Wood & Furr, 2016), and (b) for ideals that are assessed independently of a given relationship context (to limit the influence of the reverse causal pathway where people's ideals change to reflect a current partner's traits; Neff & Karney, 2003).

larger than zero, but not a large source of compatibility (Eastwick et al., 2019a).

Just as similarity between one's ideals and a set of partner traits illustrates an attribute-matching test of compatibility, so does similarity between one's *own traits* and a set of partner traits. That is, people who are intelligent might be especially likely to positively evaluate intelligent (vs. unintelligent) partners (a Perceiver-trait × Partner-trait interaction). As it happens, this literature on similarity-matching also tends to reveal extremely small effect sizes. In initial attraction settings, similarity-matching effects of personality, demographic variables, and interests/values on romantic evaluations tend to be quite small (Luo & Zhang, 2009, Montoya et al., 2008; Tidwell et al., 2013). In established relationships, similarity-matching on personality traits (e.g., the Big Five) typically explains less than 1% of the variance in relationship quality (Chopik & Lucas, 2019; Dyrenforth et al., 2010; Malouff et al., 2010; Solomon & Jackson, 2014; van Scheppingen et al., 2019), and this same conclusion applies to demographic variables, interests, attachment style, and values (Lozano et al., 2021; Luo, 2009; Watson et al., 2004). Relatedly, some studies have also examined whether people evaluate potential partners more positively to the extent that they are similar on traits that are classically related to the concept of mate value (e.g., attractiveness, popularity), but these studies have also documented very small effect sizes (Eastwick & Hunt, 2014; Luo & Zhang, 2009; Tidwell et al., 2013; Wurst et al., 2018). A reasonable cumulative estimate of similarity effects across all mating-relevant attributes is again $r = .10$; perhaps larger than zero, but likely quite small.[2]

Complementarity—or the idea that "opposites attract"—is a third conceptualization of the matching concept (Winch, 1958). This idea has fared especially poorly, as there is little reliable evidence that two people are more attracted to each other or happier together in a relationship to the extent that they have different attributes (Cundiff et al., 2015; Finkel et al., 2012; Watson et al., 2004, White & Hatcher, 1984).

Methodological factors could partially explain the inability of attribute-matching tests to account for compatibility. For example, nearly all the predictors reviewed above are assessed via self-report (e.g., preferences, personality, attributes of the target), and perhaps interactions among behavioral, implicit, or hormonal variables would be more likely to produce matching effects. Also, range-restriction and related sorting phenomena could have reduced these effect sizes: Attribute-matching tests might in principle affect evaluations based on a target's race or education, but because people already live in environments that are socioeconomically segregated, they get few chances to meet the types of partners who would make them especially unsatisfied (Eastwick et al., 2017; Kalmijn, 1998; Schwartz & Mare, 2012). In this article, MET poses a theoretical reason for this compatibility puzzle: that there are two distinct types of compatibility. One is due to forms of attribute matching that generalize across all perceivers and targets who possess the relevant (matched or mismatched) features, whereas the other is bound to a single, specific target. MET generates the prediction that the variance explained by the feature-based type is modest, whereas the variance explained by the target-specific type is substantial.

Puzzle #2: Partner Effects in Initial Attraction Contexts Are Large . . .

Partner effects are central to the seemingly obvious notion that some people are more romantically appealing than others—that people differ in "mate value" (Eastwick & Hunt, 2014; Miller & Todd, 1998). The term a *partner effect* refers to the association between (a) an attribute that characterizes a target (e.g., a potential romantic partner) and (b) a perceiver's romantic evaluation of the target. Two types of partner effects are especially common in the existing literature: Researchers might try to predict romantic evaluations from either the self-reported attributes of the target (e.g., the target's own Big Five personality), or from third-party (i.e., "objective") ratings of a target (e.g., coder ratings of the target's attractiveness). These types of partner effects are presumed to reveal the evaluative consequences of what a person is "really like" on average.[3]

In initial attraction contexts, researchers commonly document moderate-to-large partner effects using these approaches. Illustrative examples of strong partner effects that use self-reported features of the target include: Perceivers report greater initial attraction to targets who self-report low attachment anxiety (McClure & Lydon, 2014; McClure et al., 2010), high mate value (Back et al., 2011), and high narcissism (Jauk et al., 2016). Illustrative examples of strong partner effects that use objective or third-party ratings of the target include: Perceivers report greater initial attraction to targets who have physically attractive faces and bodies (Back et al., 2011; Kurzban & Weeden, 2005; Luo & Zhang, 2009; Walster et al., 1966), low body mass index (Asendorpf et al., 2011), and who are tall (Sidari et al., 2021). Generally speaking, these effects range from $r = .20$ to .40; for physical attractiveness, in particular, effect sizes can be even larger.

Machine learning approaches (Yarkoni & Westfall, 2017) have also been instrumental in revealing the collective power of partner effects. Specifically, a machine-learning technique called "Random Forests" (Breiman, 2001) tests how much variance in a dependent measure can be collectively explained from a large set of predictors. One study used random forests in conjunction with speed-dating to see how well targets' consensual desirability could be predicted from over 100 self-reported variables assessed prior to the speed-dating events (Joel et al., 2017). In this study, targets' self-report ratings collectively predicted a healthy amount of variance (i.e., 20%–25%) in their speed-dating partners' romantic attraction ratings; the strongest predictors included the target's self-reported levels of their own mate value, attractiveness, and emotional stability. In summary, it is straightforward to document partner effects in initial attraction contexts.

[2] Of course, men and women in dating and married relationships correlate highly (i.e., $r = .40$–$.60$) on these same variables (i.e., assortative mating; Luo, 2017; Watson et al., 2004). However, because forces like social stratification, market forces, and situation selection cause people to meet and date similar others, these correlations bear little on similarity-attraction effects. That is, assortative-mating correlations reliably emerge even in the absence of any attraction to similar others (Eastwick et al., 2019a, Kalick & Hamilton, 1986).

[3] Our use of the term "partner effect" throughout this article follows the actor–partner interdependence model (APIM) formulation: The effect of a feature of a partner on someone else's judgment (i.e., the effect of partner variable *X* on perceiver variable *Y*; Cook & Kenny, 2005). Our use of the term "target effect" (below) follows the SRM formulation: The average consensual judgment about a target (i.e., the average *Y* about a given partner). Although partner effect and target effect are sometimes used interchangeably in the literature, MET requires that we keep these two concepts separate, and so our use of these terms (as well as actor effect and perceiver effect) are not interchangeable; see Appendix for details.

. . . but Partner Effects in Established Relationships Are Small

Partner effects are not as large in established relationship contexts. That is, a target's self-reports and third-party ratings of the target—variables that tap who a person "really is" on average—only modestly predict a perceiver's current relationship satisfaction with the target. For example, the total effect of a target partner's personality on a perceiver's relationship satisfaction tends to be small; correlations rarely exceed $r = .15$ (e.g., a reasonable estimate for the partner's emotional stability), and a partner's personality collectively explains between 1% and 5% of the variance in a perceiver's relationship satisfaction (e.g., Chopik & Lucas, 2019; Dyrenforth et al., 2010; Malouff et al., 2010; Robins et al., 2000; Solomon & Jackson, 2014; van Scheppingen et al., 2019). Partner effects are also modest on average (i.e., below $r = .10$) for self-reported variables like attachment anxiety (Campbell et al., 2005; Lozano et al., 2021) and narcissism (Gewirtz-Meydan & Finzi-Dottan, 2018; Lamkin et al., 2015; Lavner et al., 2016)—variables that intuitively seem like they should powerfully (and negatively) affect a current romantic partner's relationship satisfaction. Objective ratings of a current partner's physical attractiveness also exhibit very small partner effects (Eastwick, Neff, et al., 2014; Meltzer et al., 2014).

Random forests have also been helpful in illuminating the collective size of partner effects in established relationships. One large-scale collaborative machine-learning effort that spanned 43 different data sets and over 11,000 established couples found that all available self-reports by a current romantic partner could predict only 5% of the variance in the perceiver's relationship satisfaction and 4% of the variance in the perceiver's commitment (Joel et al., 2020). A similar machine-learning study was able to account for only ~2% of the variance in the perceiver's reports of relationship satisfaction, sexual satisfaction, conflict, harmony, and separation intentions using the partner's self-reports (Großmann et al., 2019). That these 2%–5% values are considerably weaker than the 20%–25% values documented in the speed-dating machine-learning data (Joel et al., 2017) support the suggestion that partner effects play a large role in initial-attraction contexts and a small role in established relationships.

Once again, it is possible that methodological factors could partially explain this discrepancy. Initial attraction and relationship satisfaction are typically measured by different scale items, so cross-study comparisons of effect sizes are not perfectly parallel. If people who self-report undesirable qualities do not have the opportunity to form relationships, then partner effects of these variables might be weaker in established relationships because of a restriction of range.[4] It is also possible that some key, highly specific individual-difference variables exhibit large partner effects (e.g., people who cultivate many backup mates; Buss et al., 2017), but they have not been systematically examined in established relationships yet. MET poses a theoretical reason for this partner-effects puzzle: that, over time, perceivers reduce their reliance on commonly shared information when generating romantic evaluations.

The Social Relations Model

To solve these two puzzles, we need the SRM (Kenny, 2020). Further, we need to expand it by positing that relationship variance in the SRM (i.e., a useful operationalization of compatibility; Kenny, 2020; Reis et al., 2021) can come from two distinct sources: (a) attribute matching, and (b) the idiosyncratic information and partner-specific history (i.e., path-dependence; David, 1985; Mishina et al., 2012) bound to one specific relationship. This expansion will help to solve the first puzzle. Then, by carving out a role for repeated interaction to create relationship variance (i.e., vis-à-vis a dyad's path-dependent history), we can explain the decline of partner effects over time by positing that an increase in the evaluative importance of dyad-specific information leads to a decline in the evaluative impact of the features of the partner that are available to all perceivers.

Target, Perceiver, and Relationship Variance

According to the SRM, one person's evaluative rating of another person (e.g., the extent to which Patty likes Tomás on a scale of 1–7) consists of three statistically and conceptually independent components—target, perceiver, and relationship effects (Kenny, 1994, 2004, 2020; Kenny & La Voie, 1984). *Target* effects refer to the consensus about a given target's likeability: How likable do people generally perceive Tomás to be? *Perceiver* effects refer to the general liking tendencies of a given rater: How much does Patty generally like other people? *Relationship* effects refer to unique liking that is not due to the target or the perceiver effect: Does Patty like Tomás more (or less) than what would be expected from his target effect and her perceiver effect?

SRM hypotheses often hinge on the *variability* in target, perceiver, and relationship effects in a population of raters and targets. For example, when target effects are variable (i.e., average likeability is high for some targets and low for others), then there will be a large amount of target variance. Variance is usually expressed as a percentage; in a population where target effects are relatively large and perceiver effects are relatively small, target variance would comprise a larger percentage of the total variance (e.g., 30%) than perceiver variance (e.g., 15%). In such a population, twice as much variance in evaluations is due to the person being evaluated than due to the person doing the evaluating. In a typical SRM study where heterosexual participants meet other-sex strangers face-to-face, romantic attraction measures generally consist of approximately 20%–30% target variance, 10%–20% perceiver variance, and 25%–35% relationship variance, with error variance comprising the remainder (Asendorpf et al., 2011; Jauk et al., 2016; Joel et al., 2017; Payne, 2011). There are also a few studies that examine variance partitioning of romantic evaluations as people get to know each other; they reveal that relationship variance is especially large among well-acquainted individuals (Eastwick & Hunt, 2014; see also Kenny, 2020; Lakey & Orehek, 2011).

The SRM—especially its precise, quantitative separation of the "relationship" from the two individuals who comprise it—yields theoretical benefits in two ways. First, SRM's variance partitioning values denote the best estimate of the extent to which different classes of predictors cumulatively affect romantic evaluations. With respect to the two puzzles described above, pronounced effects of

[4] It bears noting that *actor* effects (i.e., the effect of my personality on my own satisfaction) are approximately equally predictable in both contexts using these variables (i.e., initial attraction 10%–15%; established relationships 15%–20%; Joel et al., 2017, 2020), so a pure statistical artifact explanation for puzzle #2 seems unlikely.

compatibility should create large amounts of relationship variance, and pronounced partner effects should create large amounts of target variance. Conversely, if target variance proved to be small in a particular context, then any consensually rated feature of a partner (e.g., mate value) would have quite limited ability to explain how mate evaluation works in this context, and partner effects would generally be small.

Second, the SRM approach highlights that a perceiver's evaluation of any target (e.g., Patty's relationship satisfaction with Tomás) will be comprised of the three sources. Researchers are used to seeing SRM estimates in designs where multiple perceivers rate multiple targets. But in reality, the logic underlying the SRM applies even in cases where the target and perceiver variances are unavailable to the researcher. Consider marital satisfaction: Outside of polygamous contexts, people are not commonly married to multiple spouses simultaneously, so researchers cannot calculate the extent to which Tomás would make all his spouses satisfied (i.e., his target effect) or the extent to which Patty would be satisfied with all her spouses (i.e., her perceiver effect). Nevertheless, regardless of measurement constraints, Patty's relationship satisfaction with Tomás is jointly comprised of all three effects. Therefore, even measures that intuitively seem to capture relationship-specific sources (e.g., satisfaction, conflict, trust, intimacy, and other classic relationships measures) likely capture perceiver and target sources, too.

SRM and the Distinction Between Semantic and Evaluative Processes

SRM approaches have been applied to both semantic and evaluative judgments. *Semantic* processes refer to the way a person makes inferences about the traits, goals, beliefs, intentions, and values of a target person (e.g., "Tomás is competitive," "Tomás values kindness"), whereas *evaluative* processes refer to the way a person comes to like, desire, or feel positive versus negative about a target person (e.g., "I like Tomás"). Although semantic and evaluative judgments will often be associated (e.g., "I think you are immoral, and so I do not like you"), there is theoretical and empirical value in treating them separately (Amodio & Hamilton, 2012; Amodio & Ratner, 2011; Bargh et al., 1996; Carlston, 1992, 1994; Olcaysoy Okten et al., 2019; Schneid et al., 2015).

Many models in the person-perception literature address how people integrate existing and new information when making *semantic* judgments about another person's traits, attributes, and social category membership (e.g., Fiske & Neuberg, 1990; Freeman & Ambady, 2011; Kunda & Thagard, 1996). Of particular relevance to the current article, Kenny's (2004) PERSON (personality, error, residual, stereotype, opinion, and norm) model draws from SRM concepts to explain how raters achieve consensus about a target person's traits, both initially and over time. Such models illuminate people's semantic judgments about social targets; that is, they address how people draw from a variety of information sources (e.g., the target's behavior and appearance; shared or personal schemas) to arrive at (accurate or biased) answers to questions such as "Is this person confident?" (see the Supplemental Material for additional discussion about connections between PERSON and MET).

MET is situated downstream of the PERSON model and these related approaches. That is, MET focuses specifically on the *evaluative* component of person perception, addressing questions like "Given that I perceive him to be confident, how much do I like him?" Applications of connectionist models in the attitude literature (Bassili & Brown, 2005; Conrey & Smith, 2007; Ehret et al., 2015; Monroe & Read, 2008; Van Overwalle & Siebler, 2005) have started to provide clues for answering this question. For example, Dalege et al.'s (2016, 2018) Causal Attitude Network Model represents attitudes as networks of smaller attitudinal elements, each of which is caused by a distinct piece of semantic information about a target individual (e.g., "he is intelligent"). MET is inspired by these models: It preserves the flow from semantic judgments to evaluative elements, and it makes the novel contribution of also incorporating (and extending) SRM concepts.

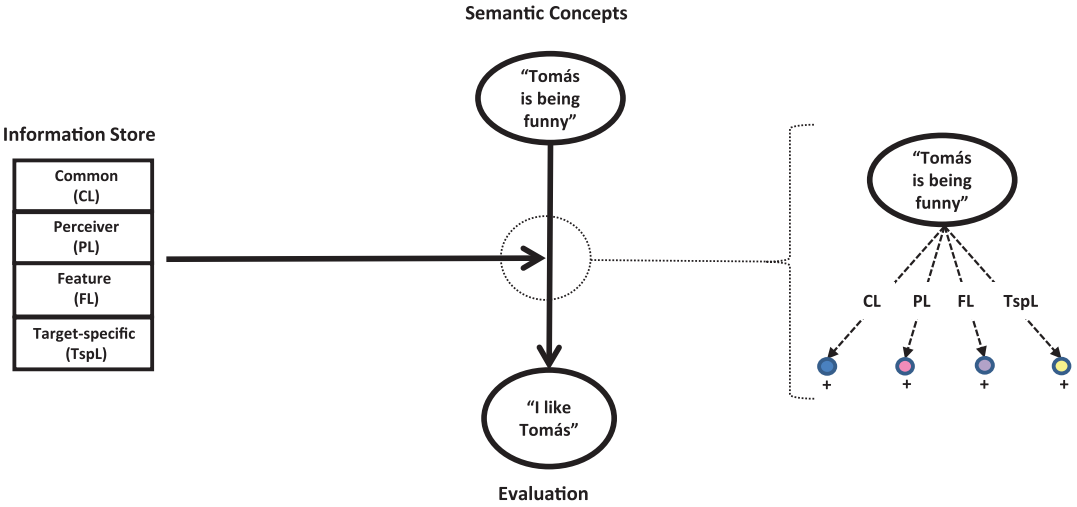
Mate Evaluation Theory: An Overview

MET addresses the question: "How do people come to feel positive about a mate, and how does this process change over time?" *Evaluation* is MET's centerpiece and refers to any valenced judgment (e.g., attraction, romantic desire, relationship satisfaction) that is directed toward a particular *target mate* (someone who could be or currently is a romantic or sexual partner; hereafter simply "target"). This description below uses an illustrative example in which a perceiver Patty is evaluating a target, Tomás, in a group of interacting friends.

MET depicts the process by which a perceiver translates *semantic* concepts (e.g., the traits, goals, beliefs, intentions, or values of the target) into an *evaluation* (Figure 1, Table 1). For example, assume that Patty has made the attribution "being funny" as Tomás is telling a story. MET focuses on the evaluative implications of this attribution (i.e., how this attribute leads Patty to think that Tomás is more, or less, likable). Specifically, MET posits that an activated semantic concept like "being funny" can create four different types of *evaluative* elements caused by the application of common lens (which creates evaluative elements that the figure depicts in blue), perceiver lens (rose), feature lens (purple), and target-specific lens (yellow) information. Put differently: Information in memory can be categorized into four types (i.e., lenses), and this information (when brought to mind) can operate as weights that affect the strength of the semantic concept → evaluative outcome association. The four sources in the information store are distinct from semantic concepts and evaluative elements in that the information store represents all available information in memory at a given moment in time (e.g., existing knowledge of the target, species-typical mental mechanisms, new information from the target's behavior stream), whereas the semantic concepts and evaluative elements reflect currently active information in the mind.

First, *Common Lens* information refers to factors that derive from normatively shared meaning-making processes (e.g., an evolved species-typical mental mechanism, a shared cultural script)—the "construction of a perceiving community" (Kenny, 2004, p. 269). Common lens information is identical within a population of perceivers by definition, and so perceivers will exhibit a tendency to extract the same attitude elements from a given semantic concept. For example, perceivers in a population might evaluate Tomás positively in response to his symmetrical face (Rhodes, 2006), normatively appropriate dancing behavior (Eibl-Eibesfeldt, 1989; Wade, 2017), or emotionally stable personality (Kelly & Conley, 1987). Earlier, we reviewed examples of the many partner effects

Figure 1
An Overview of Mate Evaluation Theory



Note. The effect of four sources of information on the semantic → evaluative path. CL = common lens; PL = perceiver lens; FL = feature lens; TspL = target-specific lens.

that have been documented in romantic (especially initial attraction) contexts, including physical attractiveness, attachment anxiety, narcissism; conceptually speaking, these variables should exert average effects on romantic evaluations via the common lens.

Second, *Perceiver Lens* information refers to factors that derive from individual (i.e., between-persons) differences such as personality, expectations, chronic affect, or other accessible mental schemas and routines that characterize how a person views all targets. Perceiver lens information affects how a given perceiver views all targets in a population identically by definition, and so he or she will exhibit a tendency to impose the same attitude elements on all targets. For example, Patty might have globally positive expectations that cause her to view people positively (e.g., a dispositionally positive attitude; Hepler & Albarracín, 2013, 2014), or she might tend to favor a positive over a negative interpretation of all cues (e.g., sideways glances are flirtatious, not menacing). To the extent that a given person's perceiver lens remains stable longitudinally, this lens would cause people to exhibit similar levels of positivity across different relationships over time (Johnson & Neyer, 2019; Robins et al., 2002).

Third, *Feature Lens* information refers to factors that derive from individual differences such as personality, expectations, chronic affect, or other accessible mental schemas and routines (like the perceiver lens), but this information is applied selectively—that is, in conjunction with a feature, attribute, trait, or behavior that characterizes some targets (but not others). A perceiver brings the same feature lens information to bear on all targets that exhibit the feature, and so she will exhibit a tendency to extract the same attitude elements from all such targets. For example, Patty might have a schema of ideal partner who is agreeable, funny, and plays piano, and so she will feel positive upon encountering all targets who demonstrate these attributes (Fletcher & Simpson, 2000; Fletcher et al., 1999). The feature lens provides the conceptual foundation for most examples of moderation by individual differences (i.e., Perceiver × Target interactions), in that there is typically an underlying assumption that the moderational effect should generalize across perceivers and targets (e.g., perceivers who are like *X* will tend to positively evaluate targets with feature *Z*).

Fourth, *Target-Specific Lens* information refers to factors that derive from narrative, scripts, path-dependent history, and other mental routines that a perceiver has bound to one specific relationship. That is, a perceiver brings distinct sets of target-specific lenses to bear on each target that he or she encounters. For example, Patty might like Tomás because he plays piano, but some portion of the positivity that she experiences in response to his piano-playing ability does not generalize to any other person's piano-playing ability. The target-specific lens also includes information that derives from a perceiver and target's interaction history; perhaps Tomás does a Captain Kirk impression specifically for Patty to cheer her up whenever she is down.

Table 1
Illustrations of the Four Effects of the Information Store in Mate Evaluation Theory

Information source	Example effect of information store on the semantic → evaluative path	Color in figures
Common lens (CL)	Being funny is normatively likable in Patty's culture	Blue
Perceiver lens (PL)	Patty is a dispositionally happy person who interprets attributes (like being funny) positively	Rose
Feature lens (FL)	Patty ideally wants a funny partner and therefore likes people who are funny	Purple
Target-specific lens (TspL)	Tomás' story contains in-jokes about a class he shared with Patty	Yellow

Note. Patty perceives that Tomás is being funny (semantic judgment) and therefore evaluates him positively, for four conceptually distinct reasons.

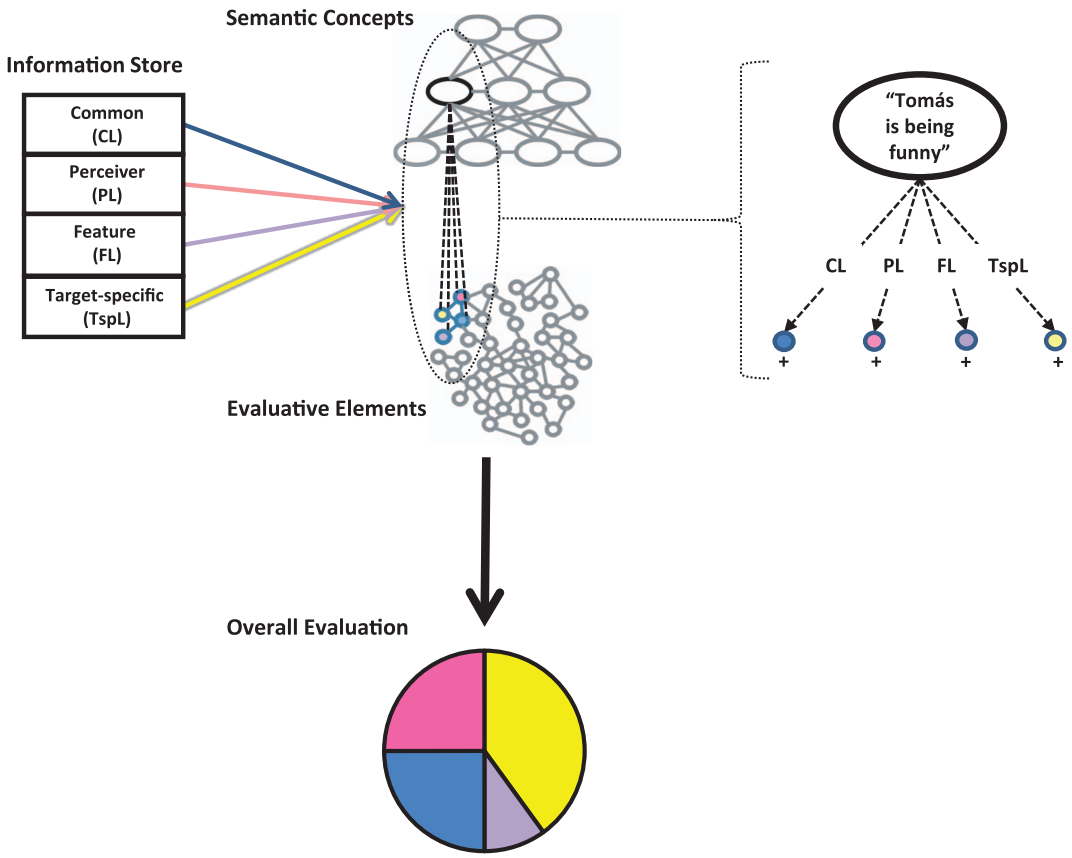
In principle, a given semantic concept can produce any number of evaluative elements. As Tomás is being funny, this event might create positive evaluative elements for Patty because being funny is normatively valued in her culture (common lens), because she is a dispositionally agreeable person with rose-colored glasses (perceiver lens), because she ideally wants a romantic partner who is funny (feature lens), and because Tomás's story contains in-jokes that are especially appealing to Patty because they reference a class they shared together (target-specific lens). Across all activated semantic concepts, an *overall evaluation* coalesces from the evaluative elements. In SRM terms, blue evaluative elements (caused by common lens information) become the target effect, rose evaluative elements (caused by perceiver lens information) become the perceiver effect, and purple and yellow evaluative elements (caused by feature lens and target-specific lens information, respectively) combine to become the relationship effect. In a population of perceivers and targets, the sum of activated evaluative elements will be reflected in the proportion of variance due to perceiver, target, and relationship variance (pie slices in the circle at the bottom of Figure 2). For example, if perceivers collectively used moderate amounts of perceiver lens information when deriving evaluations, moderate levels of perceiver variance will be apparent in the population. In this way, variance-partitioning reflects the cumulative influence of the types of information that perceivers used when evaluating the targets.

How Does MET Address Puzzle #1?

The compatibility puzzle (i.e., Puzzle #1) is that compatibility is broadly theorized to be crucial in initial attraction and close relationships contexts, but the most common (i.e., attribute-matching) tests of compatibility reveal small effect sizes. MET poses a solution to this puzzle by suggesting that relationship variance actually has two origins—a feature-based origin and a target-specific origin—that can be traced to the use of feature lens and target-specific lens information sources (Figure 2). The feature lens is relevant to attribute-matching hypotheses, but the target-specific lens is not. Therefore, the first principle of MET is: *Relationship variance (i.e., romantic compatibility) derives from two categorically distinct sources, only one of which (i.e., the feature lens) is linked to attribute-matching mechanisms*. The fact that attribute-matching effects generally reveal small effect sizes implies that feature-based

Figure 2

Mate Evaluation Theory Model Illustrating Principle #1



Note. MET addresses the compatibility puzzle (i.e., Puzzle #1) by carving relationship variance into a small (FL) and large (TspL) component. Blue pie slice = target variance; rose pie slice = perceiver variance; purple + yellow pie slice = relationship variance. Slices are scaled to sum up to 100% and therefore omit measurement error (as in Kenny, 2020). MET = Mate Evaluation Theory; CL = common lens; PL = perceiver lens; FL = feature lens; TspL = target-specific lens.

relationship variance is small, but compatibility could still be central to evaluation in human mating because relationship variance derives mainly from the target-specific lens.

The distinction between these two sources of relationship variance has not been developed theoretically in prior work; the closest analogy is Kenny's (2020) distinction between "matching" (i.e., feature lens) and "emergence" (i.e., target-specific) origins of relationship effects. Interestingly, the two sources are commonly used interchangeably in colloquial SRM illustrations. Consider the two statements "Patty uniquely likes piano-players, more than she likes people in general and more than other people like piano-players," and "Patty uniquely likes Tomás, more than she likes people in general and more than other people like Tomás." Both statements are descriptions of relationship effects. But the first draws the reader's attention to a feature lens explanation (i.e., because Patty seems to be the type of person who likes the feature "piano-playing," regardless of who exhibits it), whereas the second draws the reader's attention to a target-specific lens explanation (i.e., because Patty seems to like Tomás especially highly, with no implication that the underlying cause generalizes to other perceivers like Patty or targets like Tomás).

The distinction between feature- and target-specific lenses is deliberately categorical, not continuous. A perceiver is using the feature lens when a between-persons difference (i.e., personality, expectations, chronic affect, or other accessible mental schemas and routines) causes her to experience a certain degree of positivity for any target who is exhibiting an attribute, trait, or behavior (e.g., playing the piano). A perceiver is using the target-specific lens if her knowledge about a particular person (e.g., Tomás) causes her to experience a certain degree of positivity for that particular person's attribute, trait, or behavior. The concept of substitutability (Trope et al., 2021) distinguishes between the two lenses: Perceivers and targets are substitutable with respect to the feature lens if their features align (i.e., other perceivers like Patty should similarly evaluate targets like Tomás), whereas substitutability is not an operating principle of the target-specific lens. As described in more detail below, in a population of perceivers and targets, the sum of all conceivable Perceiver × Target interaction effects would comprise feature-based relationship variance, whereas the sum of all effects that are unique to a given dyad comprise target-specific relationship variance.

How Does MET Address Puzzle #2?

The partner-effects puzzle (i.e., Puzzle #2) is that partner effects are large in initial-attraction contexts but small in established relationships. MET addresses this puzzle by positing a shift over time in the role of the target-specific versus common lenses. The natural course of repeated interaction will cause target-specific lens information to increase: As two people spend time together, they sample different types of interdependent situations (e.g., play, work, sex, self-disclosure, etc.), and they have experiences that range from positive to negative. When these joint activities and tasks go well for both people, they will elect to do them again if they can (Smith & Collins, 2009). In other words, target-specific lens information will increase in relevance as a natural consequence of the iterative, path-dependent, and chaotic process by which people attempt to sample positive experiences with potential relationship partners while forming a relationship (Weigel & Murray, 2000; see also David, 1985; Mishina et al., 2012). This sampling process will cause relationship variance to increase as a percentage of the total variance (Smith & Collins, 2009).

As target-specific information becomes increasingly relevant, the consensual desirability of a partner's features and attributes should become less pertinent to the overall evaluative outcome (Figure 3). That is, once a perceiver possesses a store of information that shapes how they interpret a given partner's competence, trustworthiness, and sexiness (Chen et al., 2006), the perceiving community's interpretation of the partner's competence, trustworthiness, and sexiness has weaker evaluative consequences for the perceiver. Thus, the second principle of MET is: *With increasing acquaintance in a given relationship, perceivers use target-specific lens information more and common lens information less*. This shift over time explains why partner effects tend to be stronger earlier rather than later in a relationship, before repeated interaction has built a large and complex target-specific lens. (Individual differences, operating via the perceiver and feature lenses, are presumed to exert their respective effects regardless of the level of acquaintance; that is, the Principle #2 inhibitory pathway only applies to the perceiver's use of information held by all members of the perceiving community.)

The Components of MET in Detail

To Which Mating Relationships Does MET Apply?

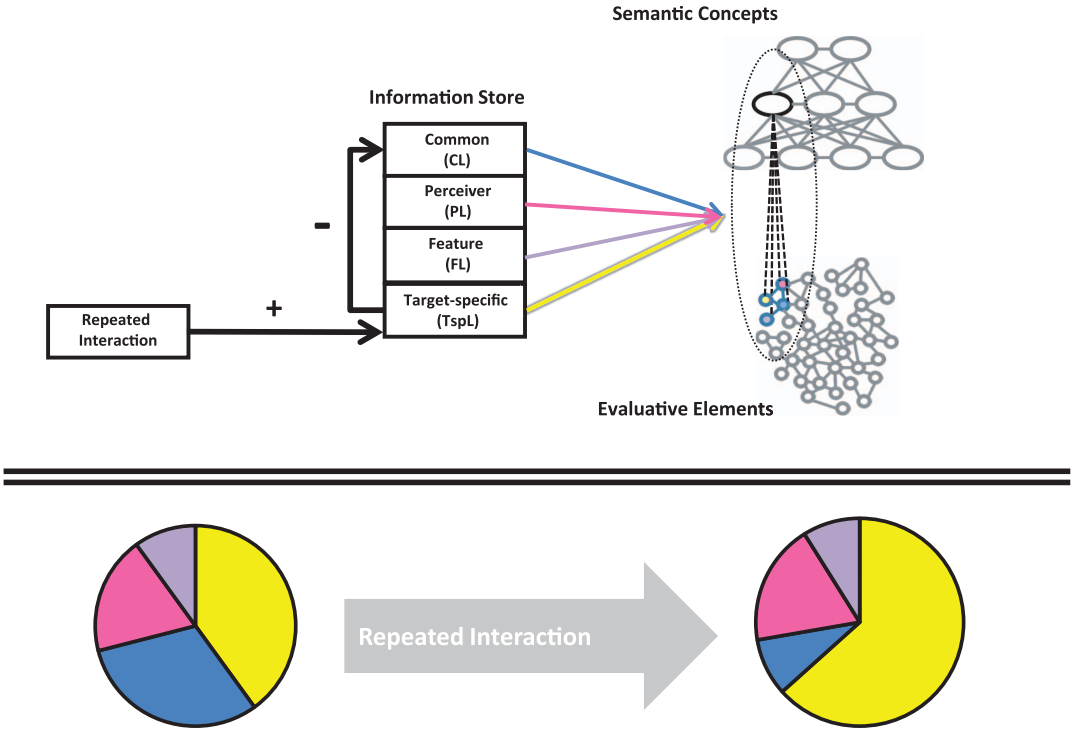
MET explains and makes predictions about how people evaluate familiar targets (i.e., targets whom the perceiver has actually met). Indeed, the findings that underlie the two "puzzles" derive entirely from studies where people evaluate targets who (a) are, or could be, mates and (b) whom they have met face-to-face, at a minimum. MET may have relevance to—but was not designed to address—either (a) evolutionarily novel contexts in which participants evaluate hypothetical partners or photographs/descriptions of potential partners, or (b) make decisions about where to meet new partners (e.g., signing up for certain dating websites). In the closing sections of this article, we discuss the implications of MET for platonic evaluative contexts as well as the broader social-cognitive literature beyond mating.

MET applies across the full time-course of most forms of human-mating relationships. On average, there is a normative evaluative trajectory that resembles an arc: Partners initially experience romantic evaluations that gradually rise, peak, and eventually decline (Eastwick et al., 2019b; Glenn, 1998; Knapp, 1978; VanLaningham et al., 2001). This decline happens sooner—and peaks are much lower—in short-term (e.g., flings, one-night-stands, purely sexual relationships) than long-term (e.g., dating, married) relationships, but the same initial-attraction process appears to apply to both contexts (Eastwick et al., 2018, 2019b). Also, specific evaluative constructs wax and wane in prominence over time: Early stages of both short-term and long-term relationships tend to exhibit elevated levels of sexual desire and passion, whereas later stages (in primarily long-term relationships only) exhibit elevated levels of attachment, intimacy, trust, and commitment (Baumeister & Bratslavsky, 1999; Eastwick et al., 2018; García, 1998; Hazan & Shaver, 1994; Sternberg, 1986).

In principle, MET also applies to relationships that are deteriorating. Relationships commonly stop and start and stop again, and they may have diffuse or ambiguous (rather than clear and

Figure 3

Mate Evaluation Theory Model Illustrating Principle #2



Note. MET addresses the partner-effects puzzle (i.e., Puzzle #2) by positing that repeated interaction enlarges the target-specific lens, which reduces the role of the common lens. Left pie chart illustrates variance partitioning in initial-attraction contexts, whereas right pie chart illustrates variance partitioning after repeated interaction between the perceiver and the target has occurred. Slices are scaled to sum up to 100% and therefore omit measurement error (as in Kenny, 2020). MET = Mate Evaluation Theory; CL = common lens; PL = perceiver lens; FL = feature lens; TspL = target-specific lens.

permanent) endings (Dailey et al., 2009; Halpern-Meekin et al., 2013). Furthermore, even after a relationship has officially ended, couples' prior interaction histories remain a salient force (Birnbaum, 2018; Spielmann et al., 2019). Thus, the longitudinal process depicted in Figure 3 retains applicability as long as two partners can recall their prior history together and continue to influence each other; of course, the extent to which couples preserve versus reinvent their own dyadic routines and narratives at each iteration of the relationship is an (untested) empirical question.

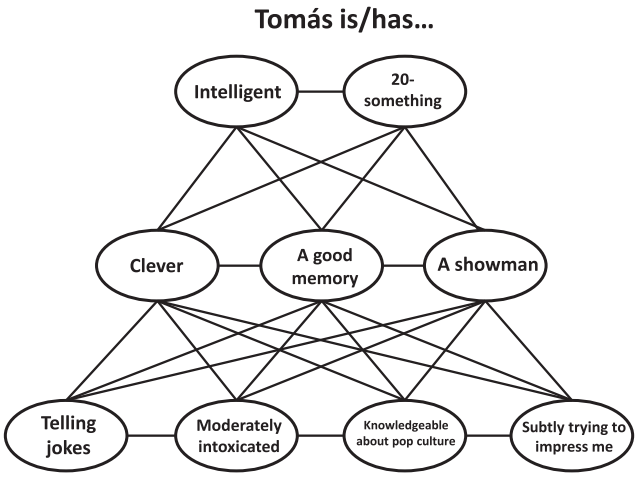
In summary, MET applies not only to (a) long-term relationships; but also to (b) short-term relationships characterized by mutual initial attraction and sexual desire, followed by insufficient interest (on the part of one or both parties) to pursue a relationship that is more committed and attached. Most people's real-life short-term relationships fit this characterization, even brief sexual encounters (e.g., "one-night-stands;" Eastwick et al., 2018, 2019b). However, MET would not apply to sexual activity without consent (e.g., some forms of prostitution, sexual assault).

Semantic Concepts and Evaluative Elements

The MET process begins with activated semantic concepts, which are defined as the perceiver's perception of the traits, goals, beliefs, intentions, and values of the target. In accord with diverse theories of person/trait perception (Freeman & Ambady, 2011; John et al., 1991; Neff & Karney, 2005; Nussbaum et al., 2003), these concepts are depicted as a linked hierarchy (Figure 4) with a smaller number of high-level, relatively stable, abstract concepts connected to a variety of low-level, relatively changeable, concrete concepts. For example, Patty might think that Tomás' comment was "clever" (a moderately abstract attribute), which could (depending on the context) activate a variety of concrete attributes such as "telling jokes," "moderately intoxicated," "knowledgeable about pop culture," and "subtly trying to impress me." This attribute may also be linked to more abstract trait (e.g., "intelligent") and social category (e.g., "20-something") concepts. For simplicity, the figure depicts concepts that could in principle be activated in the mind of any perceiver, not just Patty. (Patty's unique information about her relationship with Tomás enters the process downstream, as she applies the target-specific lens to draw evaluative implications from these concepts.) Semantic concepts (and their links) may or may not be accessible to conscious awareness (Gawronski & Bodenhausen, 2006).

Figures 2 and 3 also depict the active evaluative elements, which are defined as the attitudinal (valenced) components that derive from the activated semantic concepts. A given semantic concept can generate one, some, or many evaluative elements, and all the active elements yield the overall, global evaluation when summed. Like the Causal Attitude Network Model (Dalege et al., 2016, 2018), the

Figure 4
Semantic Concepts: An Illustration



Note. Depiction of the activation in Patty's semantic conceptualization of Tomás in the moments after he makes a comment.

color of each element reflects its causal origin. In MET, blue circles are attitude elements generated via common lens information, rose circles are attitude elements generated via perceiver lens information, purple circles are attitude elements generated via feature lens information, and yellow circles are attitude elements generated via target-specific lens information. Connections among elements reflect associative strength; for simplicity, we assume that each attitude element represents positivity of a certain magnitude when activated (e.g., a value between 0 and 1). The active elements add up to comprise the global evaluation (bottom of Figure 2), and the global evaluation is carved into the SRM sources of variance (i.e., blue = target variance, rose = perceiver, and purple + yellow = relationship) that reflect the relative prominence of the four kinds of active attitude elements.

In most models of person perception, behavioral and appearance inputs precede semantic judgments (Freeman & Ambady, 2011; Kenny, 2004; Kunda & Thagard, 1996; Little & Perrett, 2007), and semantic judgments precede evaluation (Dalege et al., 2016, 2018; Ehret et al., 2015; Peabody, 1967). MET adopts this basic sequence, too (i.e., the semantic concepts precede the activation of evaluative elements). Of course, this sequence is merely a useful theoretical simplification (Fried, 2020); in real life, activation among these components surely functions reciprocally and iteratively, such that semantic concepts and evaluative elements mutually activate each other until a stable pattern is achieved (Conrey & Smith, 2007).

Conceptualizing and Operationalizing Relationship Effects

Most theories in relationship science assume that compatibility is a major contributor to evaluative outcomes—that the way dyads cooperate, communicate, compromise, and otherwise navigate interdependence is critical. In MET, compatibility is conceptualized as the SRM relationship effect, and it posits that relationship effects arise from two fundamentally distinct sources (i.e., the feature vs. target-specific lens). However, various design and measurement issues mean that researchers often do not know what kind of relationship effect they are studying. Consequently, most study designs cannot address where compatibility comes from in the first place: Is it because a dyad is comprised of two people with matching attributes, goals, and needs, or is it because the dyad has constructed a set of interaction patterns that works for them? Before we discuss the specific predictions that derive from MET, we first explore the various ways that the feature versus target-specific lenses can be conceptualized and operationalized.

Conceptual Analogs of the Feature Lens

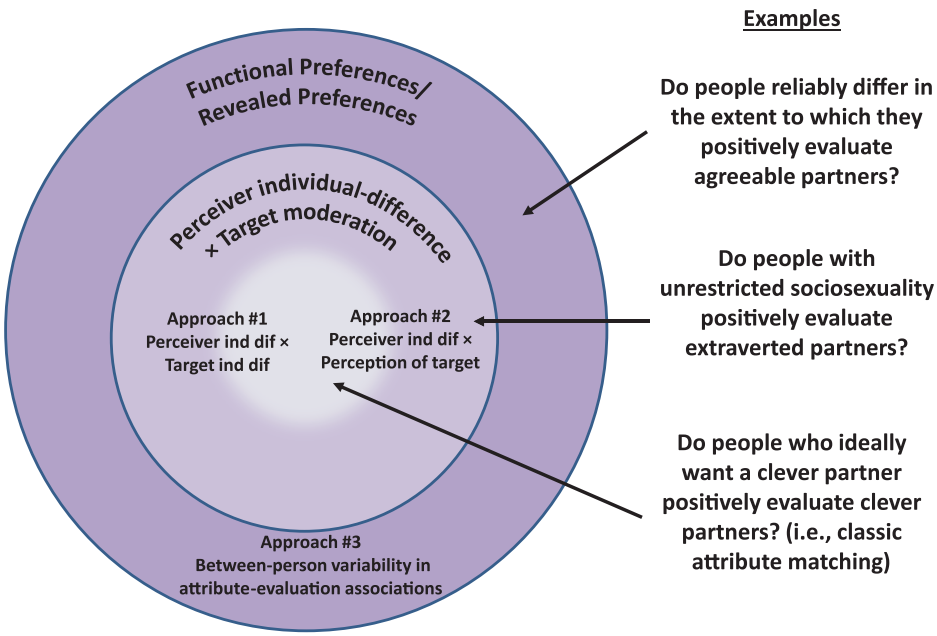
As mentioned above, most forms of moderation by individual differences operate via the feature lens. Feature lens effects could emerge as interactions between the perceivers' individual differences and targets' individual differences (e.g., "agreeable people tend to positively evaluate partners who are also agreeable;" "people with unrestricted sociosexuality tend to positively evaluate partners who are extraverted"). Alternatively, feature lens effects could emerge as interactions between the perceivers' individual differences and perceivers' unique *perceptions* of a target (e.g., "people who ideally want a clever partner tend to positively evaluate partners who they perceive to be especially clever").[5] These two approaches encompass most empirical tests of moderation by individual differences (i.e., Perceiver × Target interactions); such hypotheses are ubiquitous in the literature and are commonly derived from a wide variety of close relationships (e.g., Girme et al., 2021; Luerssen et al., 2017; Wang et al., 2021) and evolutionary psychological (e.g., Brown & Sacco, 2017; Lamela et al., 2020; Meltzer et al., 2014) perspectives (cf. Eastwick et al., in press).

Critically, these two approaches to capturing the feature lens encompass the "classic" concepts of ideal partner preference-matching, similarity-matching, and complementarity discussed as a part of Puzzle #1, and they extend more broadly to encompass other indirect forms of matching—as long as the moderation effect reflects between-persons variability among perceivers (see the feature lens definition). Figure 5 illustrates these relationships, such that the circle "Perceiver individual-difference × Target moderation" encompasses classic attribute-matching examples as well as these two approaches to moderation (i.e., Approach #1: Perceiver individual difference × Target individual difference; Approach #2: Perceiver individual difference × Perception of target).

A third conceptualization of the feature lens is that the association of a predictor with an evaluative outcome exhibits meaningful between-perceiver variability (e.g., "some people evaluate agreeable targets more positively than other people do"). This conceptualization subsumes the first two (see outer circle in Figure 5), and it simply posits that there are stable individual differences in the tendency to (e.g.) evaluate agreeable people more positively than disagreeable people (Approach #3 in Figure 5); it does not require that the researcher document what types of perceivers evaluate agreeable people more versus less strongly. In the ideal partner preferences literature, this concept is called a functional preference (Ledgerwood

[5] As it happens, Perceiver individual difference × Target individual difference effects are the broader form of the typical way that similarity-attraction effects are tested, and Perceiver individual difference × Perception of target effects are the broader form of the typical way that ideal partner preference-matching effects are tested.

Figure 5
Different Conceptualizations of the Feature Lens



Note. Perceiver individual-difference × Target moderation encompasses "classic" attribute matching (center circle) as well as other forms of moderation due to between-persons variability. Approach #1–3 refer to different operationalizations of the feature lens.

et al., 2018) or a revealed preference (Wood & Brumbaugh, 2009): To what extent does a given perceiver actually desire cleverness across a range of partners who vary in their cleverness (regardless of any identifiable feature of the perceiver that accounts for this variation)? Systematic, stable individual differences in functional preferences also illustrate the functioning of the feature lens.

Conceptual Analogs of the Target-Specific Lens

Central to the target-specific lens is the concept of path-dependence (David, 1985; Mishina et al., 2012; Salganik et al., 2006; Weigel & Murray, 2000): To understand what something is, you have to understand how it came to be that way. In the context of close relationships, relevant concepts include idioms, rituals, micro-culture, expectations, and standards that are tethered to a particular relationship (Bell et al., 1987; Burgoon, 1993; Dunleavy & Booth-Butterfield, 2009; Finkel, 2020; Garcia-Rada et al., 2018; Gottman, 2014; Harris et al., 2014; Rossignac-Milon & Higgins, 2018; Rossignac-Milon et al., 2021; Weigel & Murray, 2000). In addition, the target-specific lens encompasses other (highly idiographic) concepts in the existing literature including *goal interdependence* (e.g., two partners develop and pursue the goal of traveling through Europe together; Fitzsimons et al., 2015), *meshed interaction sequences* (i.e., two partners have a "checking in" routine at the end of the workday; Berscheid, 1983; Berscheid & Ammazzalorso, 2001), and *relationship rules* (i.e., two partners agree to disclose when they have a conversation with an ex; Baxter, 1986; West & Fallon, 2005). These are all emergent dyadic properties that apply to one of a perceiver's relationships.

The target-specific lens also includes information about the target that only the perceiver and target possess. This information may develop out of the natural course of initial getting-to-know-you conversations, which often take a variety of twists and turns (Korobov, 2011; Stokoe, 2010; Svennevig, 1999). If the relationship continues, the target-specific lens will encompass the day-to-day rhythms of interdependence that two people experience together (e.g., "My partner comforted me after I had a rough day at work last week"). In this way, the target-specific lens will expand the more time that two people repeatedly interact one-on-one, turning the relationship into a path-dependent entity that emerges from a mixture of historical and narrative forces (David, 1985; Mishina et al., 2012; Salganik et al., 2006; Weigel & Murray, 2000).

Compatibility Effects Can Reflect Either (or Both of) the Feature and Target-Specific Lenses

In close relationships research, a given compatibility effect can often be explained by both feature and target-specific mechanisms. As an example, consider a finding from the Dyadic Regulation Model of Security Buffering (Simpson & Overall, 2014): Participants' attachment avoidance interacts with their romantic partner's use of "soft" support strategies to predict the quality of partner-regulation interactions (Overall et al., 2013). In other words, if Patty is avoidantly attached, she should react especially well to partner-regulation attempts by Tomás (i.e., "I need you to change") if those attempts are accompanied by the use of affection, humor, and efforts to preserve Patty's autonomy (i.e., Patty's avoidance × Tomás' soft support).

As originally conceptualized, this is a feature lens effect—a match between an individual difference that characterizes Patty (avoidant attachment) and a feature of Tomás (using soft support). This process is depicted in the style of MET on the left side of Figure 6. But it is entirely possible that this effect is, in reality, a target-specific effect: When people develop an avoidant pattern *in a particular relationship*, they may react well to soft partner-regulation attempts; see the right side of Figure 6. The first principle of MET highlights that either or both mechanisms could be operating. The key conceptual question that differentiates the two possibilities is captured by the following thought experiment: If other targets were to exhibit the same attribute, trait, or behavior, would the participant react the same way? A feature lens explanation would mean that if someone other than Tomás used soft support strategies to try to get Patty to change, those attempts would also be especially effective for Patty (i.e., because of her dispositional attachment avoidance). A target-specific lens explanation would mean that the compatibility effect is specific to Tomás because of the way she has developed an avoidant pattern in that relationship. Differentiating these two mechanisms is challenging, and as we now explore, novel methodological approaches will often be required.

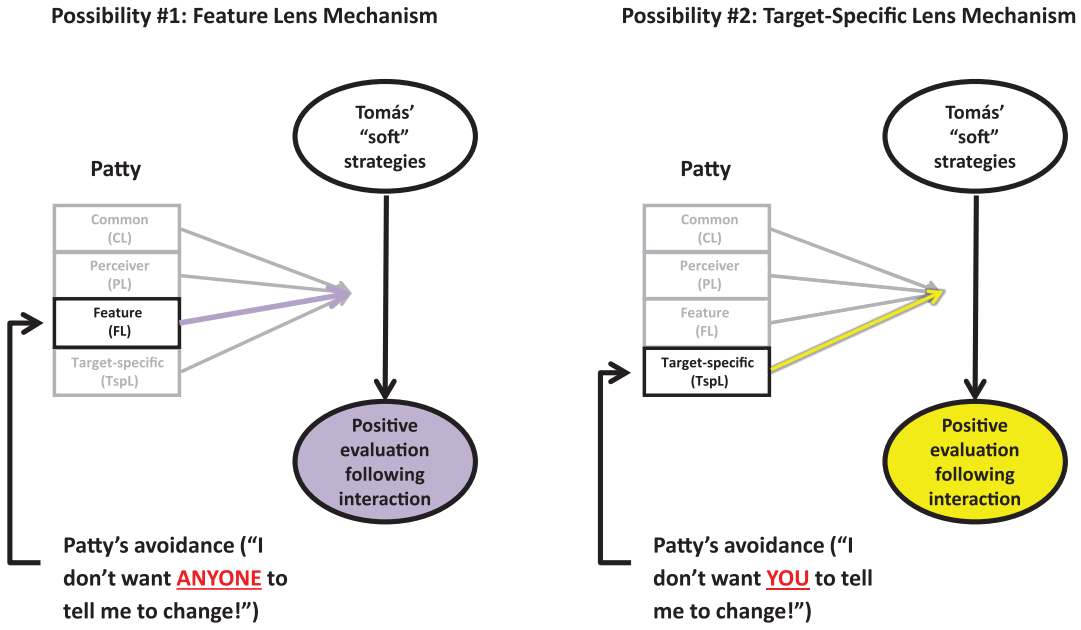
Operationalizing the Feature and Target-Specific Lenses

Existing research practices vary considerably in the extent to which they assess constructs that precisely reflect one and only one lens. Consider how the common predictive constructs in the close relationships literature typically require participants to draw on their own historical knowledge of the way the dyad has handled prior interdependence challenges, such as "I can rely on my partner to keep the promises he/she makes to me" (i.e., *trust*; Rempel et al., 1985) or "How often do you and your partner argue with each other?" (i.e., *conflict*; Braiker & Kelley, 1979). When researchers assess these items, they often think they are capturing something that derives from to the target-specific lens—something specific and unique to the participant's (one) relationship with their romantic partner. Nevertheless, such measures surely capture individual differences among perceivers (i.e., perceiver lens information), and they could conceivably capture common and feature lens influences, too.

MET highlights an opportunity for scholars—even scholars who primarily study close relationships—to realign their concepts and operationalizations by reconsidering the value of SRM designs. SRM-inspired designs (i.e., designs in which many participants rate many targets, and vice versa) permit a mathematical precision that allows researchers to separate perceiver, target, and relationship effects cleanly. As we now describe, it is also possible to adapt such a design to separate relationship variance due to the feature versus target-specific lens.

Table 2 contains several strategies to guide researchers who are interested in developing operationalizations that can better isolate feature versus target-specific components of compatibility effects. First, if a researcher wants to test whether an effect is due to the feature lens, they will want an individual difference measure (i.e., the individual difference that presumably affects the way a perceiver views *some* targets) that has not been affected by the perceiver's current romantic partner. This task is presumably easy in an initial-attraction study (e.g., speed-dating), where some data collection often takes place before two people meet. It is also presumably easy

Figure 6
Two Possible Mechanisms Underlying a Compatibility Effect



Note. Attachment avoidance × Soft support interaction documented by Overall et al. (2013). Soft strategies = attempts to preserve Patty's autonomy using affection and humor.

with individual differences that are unlikely to change as a consequence of an ongoing relationship (e.g., birth sex, ethnicity, native language). But in a study of ongoing relationships with subjective, self-reported variables, this task can be challenging (see Robins et al., 2002; Simpson et al., 2007, for illustrations). Nevertheless, this procedural detail is crucial for making the feature lens inference, as constructs like attachment styles, ideals, and personality can be shaped by ongoing relationship experiences (e.g., Davila et al., 1999; Fraley et al., 2013; Neff & Karney, 2003; Neyer et al., 2014) and therefore reflect the target-specific lens to some extent. If a researcher can be sure that an individual difference variable is unlikely to have been affected by a current partner, then Perceiver × Target moderation compatibility effects are very likely to be pure instances of the feature lens.

Second, imagine instead that a researcher wants to test whether an effect is due to the target-specific lens. The methodological innovation, in this case, is that the researcher will likely need to measure the process in multiple targets, not just the one primary target (i.e., the romantic partner). The additional targets would ideally come from the participant's *field of eligibles* (Winch, 1958): For example, they could be friends, acquaintances, work colleagues, or even exes, as long as they are approximately the participant's age, not a family member, and a member of the participant's preferred gender (Sparks et al., 2020). So, for example, a researcher could use an idiographic design that assesses what a perceiver believes to be uniquely appealing (or unappealing) about a given target, while using these other targets as control stimuli. Recall the thought experiment above: If the perceiver reacts differently when other targets exhibit the same attribute, trait, or behavior, the target-specific lens is at play. Alternatively, if the compatibility effect of interest is a statistical interaction, measures that span multiple targets would in principle allow the researcher to decompose the effect into variance at the level of the target (i.e., "Level 1," in multilevel terminology) and the level of the perceiver (i.e., Level 2); the former corresponds to the target-specific lens and the latter corresponds to the feature lens. Both target-specific examples are illustrated in more detail in the Prediction #2 section below, but critically, separating the feature and target-specific lens does not require a dyadic design (i.e., data provided by both partners), and many (perhaps most) participants are capable of nominating several targets from their field of eligibles—even if they are currently in a committed relationship (Sparks et al., 2020).

Close relationships researchers might initially find such a "multiple-targets" research design a little offbeat, but there actually is considerable precedent for it. First, in studies that examine target-specific attachment, researchers commonly assess and compare participants' attachment orientation with respect to ongoing romantic partners, close others, friends, and exes (Baldwin et al., 1996; Cook, 2000; Fraley et al., 2011; Pierce & Lydon, 2001; Sibley & Overall, 2008, 2010). Second, a growing body of work assesses implicit evaluations of romantic partners (Hicks et al., 2021), and these measures require stimuli that correspond to the romantic partner as well as stimuli that correspond to control targets (Wentura & Degner, 2010). Specifically, implicit partner-evaluation measures are usually operationalized as the difference between participants' reactions to their partner (vs.) *a control stimulus* (e.g., they assess participants' reaction times when the prime is the partner "John" versus a nonpartner prime "Steve"; Banse, 2001; Zayas & Shoda, 2005). Third, consider the literature on transference, which examines the process by which assumptions and experiences in a past relationship reemerge in a new relationship (Andersen & Baum, 1994; Brumbaugh & Fraley, 2006). These studies often use a "yoking" design in which participants evaluate (a) one target that is constructed to resemble the participant's own significant other, as well as (b) a second, yoked control target that resembles another random participant's significant other. Fourth and finally, although many SRM studies examine person perception among strangers, there are versions of these studies that can partition variance across an array of well-acquainted dyads (e.g., the key person design, Malloy, 2018; the one-with-many design, Marcus et al., 2009). All of these designs could be adapted to separate the feature and target-specific lenses, and any of them could aid researchers in constructing study designs that can more precisely explain why some relationships are more compatible than others.

Two Principles, Seven Predictions

Principle #1: Relationship Variance (i.e., Romantic Compatibility) Derives From Two Categorically Distinct Sources, Only One of Which (i.e., the Feature Lens) Is Linked to Attribute-Matching Mechanisms

Principle #1 of MET suggests that relationship variance consists of a feature-based component and a target-specific component, and

Table 2
Illustrative Strategies for Empirically Assessing the Role of the Feature and Target-Specific Lenses in Explaining Compatibility Effects

Goal	Promising strategies for improving inferential clarity	Example
If you want to test whether an effect is due to the *feature* lens …	… then measure the individual-difference variable before the relationship begins	Personality, attachment style, ideal partner preferences
	… then ensure that the individual-difference variable is unlikely to have changed in (nearly) all participants since the relationship began	Birth sex, ethnicity, native language
If you want to test whether an effect is due to the *target-specific* lens …	… then measure the process across multiple targets using idiographic, target-specific predictors	Prediction #2, example #1 (idiographic goal facilitation)
	… then measure the process across multiple targets and separate target-level (i.e., Level 1) and perceiver-level (i.e., Level 2) effects	Prediction #2, example #2 (Avoidance × Soft support)

attribute-matching hypotheses are linked by definition to the feature-based component. Thus, a coherent explanation for Puzzle #1 derives from this principle: It can be simultaneously true that attribute-matching effects are small but relationship variance is very large if most of this variance—the reason why people evaluate others uniquely positively or uniquely negatively—derives from the target-specific lens rather than the feature lens. We explore these predictions and implications in this section.

Prediction #1: Feature Lens Effects on Romantic Evaluations Will Be Collectively Small

Attribute-matching effects are intuitive, theoretically sensible forms of feature lens effects, but the feature lens is much broader than this: It includes any source of relationship variance deriving from constructs that generalize across perceivers and targets, including most forms of moderation by individual differences. Recall that there are three ways of operationalizing feature lens effects: (a) Perceiver individual difference × Target individual difference effects, (b) Perceiver individual difference × Perception of target effects, and (c) stable individual differences in functional (i.e., revealed) preferences for particular attributes. MET predicts that these effects will be collectively modest in size.

Machine learning approaches (Yarkoni & Westfall, 2017) have revealed evidence consistent with this prediction by testing the predictive power of all possible combinations of perceiver variables and target variables in a given data set. The two machine-learning studies described earlier (Joel et al., 2017, 2020) suggest that the sum total of all Perceiver individual difference × Target individual difference interactions (i.e., Approach #1 in Figure 5) on romantic evaluations may be near zero. First, the speed-dating machine-learning study was unable to predict any relationship variance (i.e., 0%) from all possible combinations of the 100+ constructs that perceivers and targets reported about themselves prior to the speed-dating event (Joel et al., 2017). In other words, the largest source of variance in initial attraction—relationship variance—was unpredictable from features that were available before the two people met (also see Finkel et al., 2012). In the established relationships machine-learning study, the story was similar: Perceiver × Target individual-difference interactions collectively accounted for ~2% of the variance in relationship satisfaction and commitment (Joel et al., 2020). Two other similar recent machine-learning efforts in established relationships corroborate this estimate (i.e., 3% or less; Großmann et al., 2019; Vowels et al., 2020). In summary, there is little evidence that certain types of perceivers positively evaluate certain types of targets in initial attraction or established relationship contexts.

The second approach (i.e., Perceiver individual difference × Perception of target interactions) has also been examined in two machine-learning studies. The established relationships machine-learning study (Joel et al., 2020) reported that the addition of individual differences to the perceiver's perception of their relationship with the target accounted for less than 1% of the variance in satisfaction and commitment. Another study (Eastwick et al., in press) examined an early relationship development context in which perceivers were reporting on targets in whom they were romantically interested (i.e., potential romantic partners, crushes). In this study, Perceiver individual difference × Perception of target interactions accounted for 3% of the variance. In short, the existing evidence from machine-learning approaches suggests that the first two operationalizations of the feature lens produce effect sizes that are quite small, consistent with the first prediction of MET.

The third operationalization has not been tested systematically to our knowledge: That is, to what extent do individual differences in functional preferences systematically account for relationship evaluations? To test this idea, researchers could examine whether there are individual differences (i.e., random variability in a multilevel modeling framework) in the association of attributes (e.g., physical attractiveness, responsiveness, intelligence) with romantic evaluations across a set of targets. Consider a speed-dating paradigm in which perceivers evaluate ~12 targets; individual differences in functional preferences are equivalent to the amount of between-person variability in the tendency for an attribute to predict the DV across all targets (i.e., the σ^2 estimate obtained by placing the attribute on the random statement).

In new exploratory analyses in our own speed-dating data (see Supplemental Materials), we examined this idea using a recent approach that can calculate individual differences in functional preferences as a fraction of the total variance ($R_t^{2(v)}$ in Rights & Sterba, 2019; Shaw et al., 2020). Across a set of attributes that covers several of the traits that people rate as central in an ideal partner (Fletcher et al., 1999), these random effect estimates cumulatively added up to ~3% for both men and women. Nevertheless, there are no published estimates of these variances to our knowledge, and future research should explore this possibility in more detail.

Prediction #2: Target-Specific Lens Effects on Romantic Evaluations Will Be Collectively Large

MET posits that relationship variance can come from a second, target-specific source: Even if Patty does not have a general preference for funny targets, she might like Tomás specifically because he is funny. The second prediction of MET is that the target-specific lens is dominant: Most of the reasons that Patty feels positively about Tomás are specific to that relationship, and if she were to evaluate another man as positively as Tomás, it would be for different reasons that are particular to that alternative relationship.

Theory and operationalization in research on established relationships are commonly premised on the centrality of the target-specific lens, as noted above. But isolating perceiver, common, feature, and target-specific lens information require empirical approaches that expand the number of targets that participants evaluate. In the Supplemental Materials, we describe a "complete design" that is an expansion of a typical blocked SRM design (e.g., a heterosexual speed-dating event where all men evaluate all women, and vice versa). This design, inspired by Lutz and Lakey (2001), is useful for illustrative purposes and for understanding the way the four lenses can be decomposed. But in practice, most researchers—especially close relationships researchers—will likely want to consider something slightly simpler. Toward that goal, this section elaborates on the two examples described in the bottom two rows of Table 2 that can test predictions about the importance of the target-specific lens.

Example #1: Idiographic Goal Facilitation. First, researchers could adapt yoking designs from the transference literature (Andersen & Baum, 1994; Brumbaugh & Fraley, 2006; Sparks et al., 2020). Consider the following simple illustration inspired by Transactive Goal Dynamics theory (Fitzsimons et al., 2015) and

related perspectives (Fitzsimons & Shah, 2008). Within this framework, goal facilitation (e.g., the extent to which Tomás helps Patty to achieve her goals) should be associated with positive relationship evaluations. Incorporating MET leads to the insight that goal facilitation could operate via the feature lens (e.g., Patty has the goal of running a marathon, so she would positively evaluate anyone who runs with her to help her train) or via the target-specific lens (e.g., Patty has the goal of running a marathon, and she positively evaluates Tomás specifically because of the particular way that he runs with her to help her train). That is, either or both mechanisms could be operating.

To tease the two possibilities apart, researchers could turn to designs that ask participants to evaluate (known) targets exhibiting different attributes or behaviors; these attributes could be nominated by participants themselves and then yoked to different targets. In this example, Patty would nominate "helps me train for the marathon" as a key reason why she likes Tomás, and presumably Patty's evaluation of a marathon-training Tomás will be considerably more positive than her evaluation of a version of Tomás who does not help her train. Critically, Prediction #2 suggests that the difference between these two evaluations should vastly exceed the size of the difference between Patty's evaluation of other targets she knows personally who are versus are not in a marathon-training role (i.e., a feature lens "yoked" control). Going one step further, if other people in the sample know Tomás, they could evaluate the marathon-training and non-training versions of Tomás to rule out the possibility that Tomás is simply an excellent training partner (i.e., a common lens "yoked" control). In other words, this experiment would reveal that goal facilitation generates positive evaluations primarily through the target-specific lens: We like people who help us with our goals, but goal facilitative effects are primarily bound to a particular target (i.e., Patty is only happy pursuing this goal with Tomás).

Example #2: Attachment Avoidance × Soft Support. Second, if researchers are interested in particular compatibility effects in the form of statistical interactions, then the use of multiple targets could in principle allow researchers to separate out feature lens and target-specific contributions to the effect. For example, let us return to the security buffering effect discussed earlier: Avoidantly attached participants react especially well to soft support in partner-regulation interactions (Overall et al., 2013), and this effect could reflect either the feature or target-specific lenses (Figure 6). The literature on partner-specific attachment (Baldwin et al., 1996; Pierce & Lydon, 2001) provides a blueprint for how a researcher might decompose this Avoidance × Soft support interaction, as researchers commonly adapt individual-difference measures of attachment style (e.g., "I prefer not to show romantic partners how I feel deep down") into partner-specific measures (e.g., "I prefer not to show _____ how I feel deep down"). Prediction #2 suggests that, if researchers use a partner-specific avoidance measure, the target-specific lens component of the Avoidance × Soft support interaction will be much larger than the feature lens component.

To test this prediction, a researcher would need to examine the strength of the Avoidance × Soft support effects using partner-specific attachment measures across multiple targets *within perceivers*. If both the avoidance and soft support measures are within-perceiver-centered (i.e., both are Level 1 variables in a multilevel modeling framework; Raudenbush & Bryk, 2002; Rights & Sterba, 2019), then the Level 1 Avoidance × Soft support interaction represents the target-specific lens component of the buffering effect, and the Level 2 Avoidance × Soft support interaction (i.e., the interaction of the perceiver means for both variables) represents the feature lens component of the buffering effect. In other words, the Level 1 interaction tells us whether perceivers react well to soft support from targets to whom they feel especially avoidantly attached to a specific target, whereas the Level 2 interaction tells us whether perceivers react well to soft support in general (i.e., across targets) if they feel avoidantly attached in general. In this design, the Level 1 interaction should be much larger than the Level 2 interaction, according to Prediction #2.

In summary, even if it is indeed true that most of the reasons that Patty evaluates Tomás positively are specific to that relationship, it does not mean that the Patty–Tomás relationship is too unpredictable to study. But it does mean that researchers need to assess multiple targets and develop idiographic approaches in order to empirically determine what those reasons really are.

Prediction #3: Sex Differences on Evaluations Will Tend to Emerge as Main Effects, Not Sex × Attribute Interaction Effects

Individual differences likely exert effects in the early stages of relationships through the common and perceiver lens, and they likely exert effects in the later stages of relationships through the perceiver lens primarily (Figure 3). They exert few effects through the feature lens (because feature lens effects are very small), and they do not exert effects through the target-specific lens at all (target-specific lens information cannot describe "an individual" by definition). Sex (that is, biological sex) is one of the most central individual differences in some theories of human mating (Buss & Schmitt, 1993; Gangestad & Simpson, 2000). MET does not carve out a special role for sex but rather makes predictions about sex differences in the same way that it makes predictions about other individual differences. Put differently, because MET delineates where individual differences are more versus less likely to exert effects, it also delineates where sex differences are likely to be large versus small.

The implications of conceptualizing sex as an individual difference are as follows. With respect to the main effects, there are two independent possibilities. First, via the common lens, men and women may differ in their overall tendency to be evaluated positively in initial-attraction contexts, and this effect could be mediated by a wide variety of factors (e.g., women are sexier than men on average; Eastwick & Smith, 2018; Wood & Brumbaugh, 2009). Second, via the perceiver lens, men and women may differ in their overall tendency to experience positive evaluations, and this effect could be mediated by a wide variety of factors (e.g., women are especially wary of male strangers, Clark & Hatfield, 1989, Conley, 2011; men are less selective than women in mate selection contexts, Fletcher et al., 2014; Trivers, 1972). Disentangling common versus perceiver lens mechanisms for the effect of sex on evaluative responses will require data sets that include a mixture of same-sex and other-sex dyads (West et al., 2008).

Sex differences in relationship effects are constrained, however, by the feature lens. That is, the small role for the feature lens generates the prediction that these sex differences will also be collectively small. For example, given that men have stronger ideals for attractiveness than women do (Buss, 1989), does attractiveness predict men's evaluations of women more positively than it predicts

women's evaluations of men? This is a feature lens effect, with perceiver sex simply substituted in for the perceiver's ideal for attractiveness (or for any other individual-difference variable). As it happens, such "dose-response" (attractiveness = dose, evaluations = response) sex differences tend to be small. In face-to-face initial-attraction contexts and established relationships, Perceiver-sex × Partner-attribute interactions are tiny (i.e., $q = .05$ or smaller) for attributes that exhibit sex-differentiated ideals, like attractiveness, earning potential, and even the partner's age (Bühler et al., 2021; Eastwick, Luchies, et al., 2014; Kurzban & Weeden, 2005; Proulx et al., 2017; Sidari et al., 2021). In the machine-learning studies reviewed above in which sex has an opportunity to moderate myriad other variables, sex makes only modest contributions to the models, if at all (Großmann et al., 2019; Joel et al., 2020; Vowels et al., 2020). In short, if a data set contains an evaluative variable—whether dichotomous (e.g., the choice to date some partners and not others) or continuous (relationship satisfaction with a partner)—MET predicts that sex differences in the dose-response effect of various attributes on these DVs will be small because the role of the feature lens is small.

To be clear, MET's implications for sex differences do not apply to connections between external cues and semantic concepts (e.g., when he swings his arm, he is aggressive; when she does it, she is playful) or to connections between different semantic concepts (e.g., when he speaks up in a meeting, he is assertive; when she does it, she is shrill; Amanatullah & Morris, 2010). The existing mating literature contains many such sex differences, including the fact that features of bodies (e.g., shoulder width, waist-to-hip ratio) are associated with body attractiveness differently for men and women (Sidari et al., 2021), or offers for casual sex elicit different inferences about the dangerousness and sexual capabilities of male versus female requesters (Conley, 2011), or various partner behaviors (e.g., sexual vs. emotional infidelity) inspire jealousy differently for men and women (Guerrero, 2014; Sagarin et al., 2012). MET places no constraints on sex differences among semantic concepts like these. Rather, Prediction #3 hinges on whether the activation of a given semantic concept exhibits sex differences in the extent to which it predicts an evaluative outcome. Thus, semantic concepts like "body attractiveness" or "sexually capable" or "making me feel jealous" should exhibit similar dose-response associations with evaluative responses for men and women, which is what the existing data indeed suggest (Conley, 2011, Study 3; Guerrero, 2014; see the Supplemental Material for an additional analysis of sex differences in body features in Sidari et al., 2021).

How Can Principle #1 Be Falsified?

The three predictions that derive from Principle #1 are premised on the idea that, in order to explain where compatibility comes from, we need to consider the feature and target-specific lenses as two independent sources. Given the existing data, it is possible that all conceivable feature lens effects could collectively add up to a small amount (10%) of stable (i.e., nonerror) variance, which is what we depict in Figures 2 and 3 (i.e., the purple pie slice). Even though most of the published cumulative estimates of these effects are quite small (i.e., 1%–3%), it is plausible that some of the Perceiver × Target moderation effects that can be found interspersed throughout the existing literature will prove robust, following future demonstrations of generalizability and replicability (cf. Lozano et al., 2021). Nevertheless, even an optimistic estimate like 10% is consistent with the prediction that feature lens effects will generally prove to be small and cannot explain why compatibility (i.e., relationship variance; Kenny, 2020) is so large in romantic evaluations.

But perhaps the 10% estimate will prove too pessimistic, as additional replicable evidence of feature lens effects start to accumulate (perhaps with the advent of extremely large close-relationships data sets that can account for a multitude of tiny-but-real effects; Okbay et al., 2016). In this case, there are two possible outcomes vis-à-vis MET. One outcome is that the feature lens will account for a larger portion of the variance than we currently posit, but there is still a gap such that the feature lens cannot explain the sum total of relationship variance. In this case, the pie slices in Figures 2 and 3 can be redrawn to reflect the new data; we will have been wrong that the target-specific lens is where the vast majority of the "action" is, but carving compatibility into two sources would remain essential. A second outcome is that the feature lens will essentially account for all compatibility variance. Insofar as this empirical reality proves robust, we would lose confidence in Principle #1 altogether and return to a pre-MET paradigm (i.e., compatibility is a thing that emerges at the intersection of stable attributes of perceivers and attributes of targets).

Principle #2: With Increasing Acquaintance in a Given Relationship, Perceivers Use Target-Specific Lens Information More and Common Lens Information Less

In initial-attraction contexts, both the common and target-specific lenses affect evaluative responses. The common lens (drawing from species-typical mechanisms or cultural scripts) may provide a useful "best guess" at whether, for example, a night out will be enjoyable ("Does she seem open to new experiences?") or a sexual encounter will be gratifying ("Does he have muscular features?"). The target-specific lens will also likely have a role; even in the absence of much-shared history with a particular partner, people will likely have idiosyncratic evaluative reactions to the way a given target expresses a trait, goal, belief, intention, or value.

With increasing acquaintance, two people begin to reveal things to each other in private that are not available to other perceivers. Furthermore, once a relationship becomes established, partners develop dyadic routines and rules, which should increase in complexity as couple members become more interdependent in their everyday interactions, emotional experiences, and goal pursuits (Berscheid, 1983; Berscheid & Ammazzalorso, 2001; Fitzsimons et al., 2015). Eventually, the growing corpus of information in the target-specific lens should provide the best method of predicting whether things are going to go well in the near future: Every time we have a fun time, or have great sex, or navigate a conflict, we grow the bank of knowledge that facilitates our ability to have subsequent positive experiences with each other (Smith & Collins, 2009). This relational information in the target-specific lens (e.g., my interpretation of your traits, goals, beliefs, intentions, or values) takes on greater diagnostic value than common lens information (e.g., the perceiving community's interpretation), so common lens information plays less of a role in shaping evaluative outcomes.

In this way, MET offers a formal explanation for the popular notion that building a relationship takes time; it is not enough to simply "make the right choice" by selecting a partner with attributes

that are consensually desirable (i.e., via common lens) or idiosyncratically desirable (i.e., via the feature lens). Rather, good or bad relationships emerge as a consequence of whether people can "make the choice right" by navigating a chaotic process that is often unknowable and unpredictable in advance (Weigel & Murray, 2000). The history, narrative, and routines that form around the way couples navigate this path-dependent process generates the corpus of information that comprises the target-specific lens. Several new predictions and implications follow from this principle.

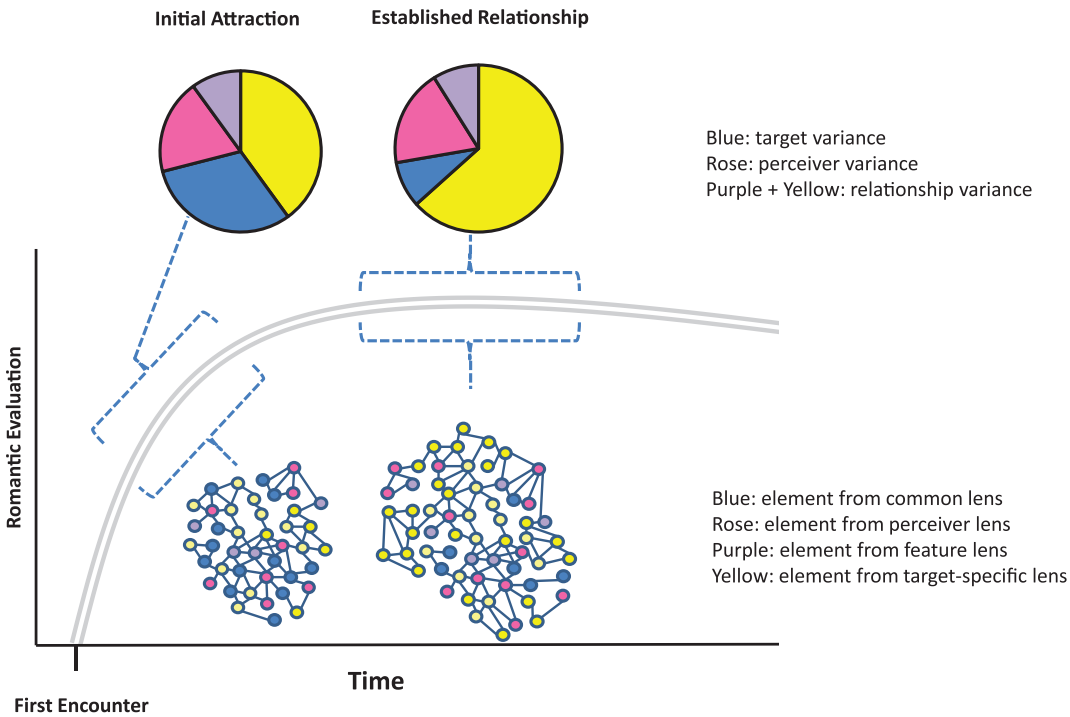
Prediction #4: With Increasing Acquaintance, Relationship Variance Will Increase and Target Variance Will Decrease

Prediction #4 is the downstream variance-partitioning consequence of Principle #2, since the use of common lens information generates target variance and the use of target-specific lens information generates relationship variance. Some evidence for this prediction is evident in existing SRM studies of evaluative measures in romantic contexts (e.g., sexual attraction, romantic desire, date choices). First, recall that in initial encounters in which participants evaluate other-sex strangers face-to-face (e.g., speed-dating), relationship variance comprises 25%–35% of the variance, which is slightly larger than target variance (20%–30%), which is slightly larger than perceiver variance (10%–20%; Asendorpf et al., 2011; Jauk et al., 2016; Joel et al., 2017; Kenny, 2020; Payne, 2011). These findings imply that a perceiver's evaluative response to a target is strongly influenced by information reflecting compatibility (i.e., feature and target-specific lenses), which is more influential than information shared by all perceivers (i.e., common lens), which is, in turn, more influential than information affecting the perceiver's view of all targets (i.e., perceiver lens). This breakdown is reflected in the "initial attraction" (i.e., left) overall evaluation pie chart in Figure 7: The sum of purple and yellow (i.e., relationship) is somewhat larger than the blue portion (i.e., target), which is somewhat larger than the rose portion (i.e., perceiver).

If Prediction #4 is correct, then as people get to know each other, the relative balance of the components should change: Target variance will decline and relationship variance will increase. This prediction is supported by several additional studies examining romantic attraction among other-sex individuals who have interacted beyond a single encounter (Eastwick & Hunt, 2014; Eastwick et al., 2017). In one study (Eastwick & Hunt, 2014, Study 2), classmates reported their desire to form a romantic relationship with one another, and over the course of ~3 months, and they exhibited increases in relationship variance and decreases in target variance. Among networks of friends and acquaintances who had known each other for months or years, relationship variance on these evaluative measures was 10 times larger than target variance (Eastwick & Hunt, 2014, Study 3). These findings imply that a perceiver's evaluative response to a well-known target is very strongly influenced by information reflecting compatibility rather than information shared by all perceivers (i.e., common

Figure 7

The Overall Romantic Evaluation and Evaluative Elements Over Time



Note. The two pie charts depict variance partitioning of an overall romantic evaluation of a target (e.g., romantic desire), superimposed on a normative relationship trajectory (from Eastwick et al., 2019b). The two networks reflect the activation of attitude elements that underlie each overall evaluation. Slices are scaled to sum up to 100% and therefore omit measurement error (as in Kenny, 2020).

lens). This shift is reflected in the "established relationship" (i.e., right) overall evaluation pie chart in Figure 7.

According to Prediction #4, established relationship partners should generally exhibit large amounts of relationship variance and small amounts of target variance when evaluating each other. Such data are challenging to collect; people in contemporary Western contexts do not commonly have multiple established relationship partners at the same time. Nevertheless, studies that collect evaluative measures from multiple romantic partners over the course of a target individual's life offer a close approximation. One study examined romantic/sexual desirability ratings reported by a set of former "crushes" and romantic partners about a common target (Eastwick et al., 2017, Study 3). In this study, target variance was reliably below 10%—far less than the speed-dating studies reviewed above—suggesting that there was little agreement about who is (vs. is not) a desirable romantic partner.

Future data collection efforts could bear on this prediction, too. For example, imagine if scholars could collect online daters' impressions of each other on their real-life dates over the course of weeks after a face-to-face initial impression. In such a data set, similar relationship versus target variance shifts should emerge (as long as challenges related to attrition could be overcome so that bad matches do not systematically fall out of the data set; Ansari & Klinenberg, 2015). Other useful data could come from polyamorous couples, for whom multiple romantic partnerships take place openly and simultaneously (e.g., Moors et al., 2019). MET predicts that, among polyamorous couples who are completing romantic evaluations of one another, relationship variance will greatly exceed target variance, with perceiver variance likely falling in between (as depicted on the right side of Figure 7).

Prediction #5: Increasing Acquaintance Will Reduce the Extent to Which the Mating Market Is Competitive

Mate attraction is often competitive, with distinct "winners" and "losers" (Buss, 1988). Such competition is caused in large part by the existence of individual differences in mate value: In an environment where some people have more desirable traits than others, high mate value people have many mating opportunities (and get to select other high mate-value partners), whereas low mate value people have few opportunities (Ellis & Kelley, 1999; Kavanagh et al., 2010; Penke et al., 2007; Rudder, 2014). In the language of MET, the effects of mate value are due to the common lens; that is, if a given individual has an intrinsic level of mate value, then perceivers will assess that mate value (his/her target effect) using information that derives from a set of shared species-typical mental mechanisms or shared cultural scripts (i.e., the common lens) and evaluate that person accordingly. The existence of target variance in initial attraction contexts strongly suggests that individual differences in mate value play an important role (Eastwick & Hunt, 2014).

In contexts where people know each other well, MET predicts that competition for mates will be less intense: Because the role of the common lens drops, individual differences in mate value should decline in importance, and competition should ease as people disagree about who are (vs. are not) the valuable mates (Eastwick & Buck, 2014; Hunt et al., 2015). Therefore, future studies should reveal that intrasexual competition is more intense in contexts where other-sex partners initially meet (e.g., gatherings among strangers) than when they have gotten to know each other (e.g., groups of classmates or single friends; Eastwick, 2016). In fact, the declining role of the common lens might contribute to the reasons why pair-bonding is an evolutionarily stable strategy in most human groups (Gavrilets, 2012)—even groups that allow polygyny. It is also possible that modern innovations that boost the role of the common lens (e.g., online dating environments that provide all users with identical information about a given target) will increase intrasexual competition and inequality in the mating market (Tuckfield, 2019), thus creating a novel mating system that does not resemble typical human pair-bonding.

Prediction #6: Consensus Measures of Warmth, Competence, and Related Attributes Will Exert Stronger Partner Effects in Initial Attraction Contexts Than in Established Relationships

For some attributes, other perspectives can explain why partner effects using consensus measures should weaken with increasing acquaintance. For example, this partner-effect shift has been demonstrated most conclusively for consensus measures of physical attractiveness, which exhibit large (r = .40 or higher) partner effects on initial attraction (Back et al., 2011; Luo & Zhang, 2009) but modest (r = .10 or lower) partner effects on relationship satisfaction (Eastwick, Neff, et al., 2014; Meltzer et al., 2014). Various dual-systems perspectives positing that the sexual (i.e., mate-seeking) system comes online before the attachment (i.e., mate-retention) system can also account for this pattern, as physical attractiveness is more central to the sexual/mate-seeking than the attachment/mate-retention system (Gangestad & Simpson, 2000; Hazan & Shaver, 1994; Kenrick et al., 2010; Maner, 2019; Neel et al., 2016; Sacco et al., 2012).

Nevertheless, MET can generate predictions that these dual-systems views do not. At a broader level, these dual-systems views of human mating suggest that (a) certain traits have large evaluative consequences in mate-seeking contexts (e.g., traits linked to heritable fitness cues; Gangestad & Simpson, 2000; Sacco et al., 2012), whereas (b) other traits have large consequences in mate-retention contexts (e.g., traits linked to long-term cooperation and parenting; Fletcher & Simpson, 2000, Li et al., 2002; Valentine et al., 2020). Because Principle #2 in MET is not bound to any particular trait judgment, it mirrors the first half of the dual-systems view but not the second: According to MET, certain traits should have large evaluative consequences in mate-seeking contexts, but *few* traits should have large consequences in mate-retention contexts (because a dyad's historic pattern of navigating interdependence overshadows the partner's traits). Thus, MET generates the prediction that consensual measures of a trait should generally exert weaker partner effects with increasing acquaintance—and perhaps counterintuitively—this pattern should be true even if the trait purportedly facilitates cooperation in long-term relationships (e.g., warmth, competence; Balliet et al., 2017; Barclay, 2013). In summary, many perspectives predict that particular attributes (e.g., physical attractiveness) exert stronger partner effects in initial-attraction contexts than established relationships, but only MET predicts that traits conducive to maintaining interdependence will reveal a similar pattern.

Prediction #7: Effective Interventions in Existing Relationships Will Operate via the Perceiver and Target-Specific Lenses, Not the Common and Feature Lenses

Relationship scientists often endeavor to develop interventions that will boost partners' evaluations in the hopes of averting outcomes like breakup and divorce, which can have profound negative consequences for the well-being of partners and children alike (Baucom et al., 1998; Cordova et al., 2014; Finkel et al., 2013; Markman et al., 2010). What predictions does MET generate about the types of interventions that are likely to be effective at generating positive change? Assuming that any given intervention is feasible to implement and not cost-prohibitive, MET suggests that interventions that operate via the perceiver and target-specific lenses are more likely to produce substantial evaluative change than interventions that operate via the common and the feature lenses.

In established relationships, MET posits that few attitude elements derive from the common and feature lenses; people seem to use this information only sparingly to evaluate partners. To illustrate: If Patty and Tomás are in an established relationship, the limited role of the common lens implies that Patty is unlikely to become much happier if Tomás acquires a more emotionally stable personality or more physically attractive features, despite the fact that the perceiving community (e.g., his female acquaintances) would see these attributes as desirable. With respect to the feature lens, Patty is unlikely to become happier if Tomás changes his attributes to fit Patty's own (stable) attributes or ideals (e.g., he learns to play the piano), even though these changes might make him a better match for her vis-a-vis attribute-matching. In contrast with MET, it follows from several evolutionary perspectives that Patty will be more satisfied if Tomás develops attributes that improve his mate value (e.g., Conroy-Beam et al., 2016) or match Patty's stable ideals (e.g., Fletcher et al., 2020; Meltzer et al., 2014).

Perceiver and target-specific lens interventions are likely to be more effective precisely because people tend to draw from this information when evaluating established relationship partners. For example, with respect to the perceiver lens, Patty is likely to become happier if she changes her overall worldview so that she engages in positive rather than negative interpretations of others' behaviors, perhaps with the help of individually focused therapy (e.g., cognitive-behavioral treatment for depression; Butler et al., 2006). Critically, MET implies that the most impactful interventions will flow through target-specific lens information, perhaps by addressing the dyadic interaction routines and patterns that proliferate and calcify over the course of a relationship. For example, Patty might become happier if she and Tomás change their interaction sequences—and perhaps also their expectations about those sequences—so that they experience fewer expectancy-violating events that generate negative emotion (Berscheid, 1983; Berscheid & Ammazzalorso, 2001).

Existing evidence on interventions is approximately consistent with MET in these respects. First, some of the most effective forms of couples' therapy (e.g., systems-oriented interventions) help partners to (a) identify the (sometimes hidden) rules underlying their interaction patterns, (b) change any problematic habitual interaction sequences, and (c) reframe their interpretation of problems to facilitate more productive discussion (Bradbury & Karney, 2019; Jacobson et al., 2000; Lederer & Jackson, 1968). These forms of therapy may be effective precisely because they alter the dyadic routines and rules that constitute the target-specific lens. Second, individual cognitive-behavior therapy generally makes people feel more positive about significant others in their life in general, which is consistent with a perceiver lens mechanism (Park et al., 2014). In contrast, the evidence is far more equivocal for interventions that attempt to teach universally "good" conflict management and communication skills—which presumably would operate via the common lens (Bradbury & Karney, 2019; Rogge et al., 2013).

How Can Principle #2 Be Falsified?

The four predictions that derive from Principle #2 are premised on the idea that, with increasing acquaintance, people use target-specific information more and common lens information less. Insofar as evidence begins to accumulate that fails to support these predictions—or if strong partner effects in established relationships emerge that rival initial-attraction contexts in their ability to account for cumulative variance—then our collective confidence in Principle #2 should decline. In other words, if partner effects and target variance turn out to be more profound in established relationship contexts than what the data currently suggest, then the inhibitory pathway from the target-specific lens to the common lens in Figure 3 may be jettisoned.

Also, it bears noting that variance-partitioning studies are commonly depicted as percentages that sum up to 100%, which means that if one source of variance is smaller, others need to be larger. In other words, the apparent variance tradeoff depicted in Figure 7 could be an artifact of the fact that (a) the use of the target-specific lens increases over time, and (b) variance percentages (absent error) need to add up to 100%. If it turns out that people use the target-specific lens more over time but their use of the common lens does not change, then MET should be redrawn in a way that depicts absolute rather than relative variances (e.g., stacked bars rather than pie slices).

Table 3 contains the two MET principles that address the two puzzles that motivated the theory. It also summarizes the seven predictions described above that derive from the theory.

Further Speculations and Implications

MET Potentially Explains Normative Shifts in Specific Evaluative Constructs Over Time

Thus far, we have focused mostly on global evaluative constructs, such as initial attraction or relationship satisfaction. But close relationships scholars often investigate more specific evaluative constructs in their research (e.g., passion, trust, intimacy, love), and MET applies to the evaluative core that these constructs all share (Fletcher et al., 2000).

Notably, MET can also address how these various evaluative constructs might differ from one another. Consider that different relationship stages are associated with different evaluative constructs: For example, sexual desire peaks early, whereas intimacy and trust take time to emerge fully (Berscheid & Hatfield, 1978; Hazan & Shaver, 1994). It is possible that the relative balance of the common versus target-specific lenses is in part responsible for these shifts. That is, sexual desire may be more tightly linked to common lens information (vs. intimacy and trust), perhaps because the sexual-behavior system originally evolved to inspire the pursuit of any prospective sexual partner with desirable traits (e.g., fertility,

Table 3
Two Puzzles, Two Mate Evaluation Theory Principles, and Seven Predictions

Empirical puzzle	MET principle	Specific predictions	Existing evidence
1. Compatibility is broadly theorized to be crucial, but the most common (i.e., attribute-matching) tests of compatibility reveal small effect sizes	Relationship variance (i.e., romantic compatibility) derives from two categorically distinct sources, only one of which (i.e., the feature lens) is linked to attribute-matching mechanisms	1. Feature lens effects on romantic evaluations will be collectively small	★★☆
		2. Target-specific lens effects on romantic evaluations will be collectively large	☆☆☆
		3. Sex differences will tend to emerge as main effects, not interaction effects	★★☆
2. Partner effects in initial-attraction contexts are large, but partner effects in established relationships are small	With increasing acquaintance in a given relationship, perceivers use target-specific lens information more and common lens information less	4. With increasing acquaintance, relationship variance will increase and target variance will decrease	★★☆
		5. Increasing acquaintance will reduce the extent to which the mating market is competitive	★☆☆
		6. Consensus measures of warmth, competence, and related attributes will exert stronger partner effects in initial-attraction contexts than in established relationships	☆☆☆
		7. Effective interventions in existing relationships will operate via the perceiver and target-specific lenses, not the common and feature lenses	★☆☆

Note. Zero stars = no evidence; one star = some evidence; two stars = strong evidence; three stars = conclusive evidence (applies to no prediction yet).

low mutation load; Maner, 2019). Thus, sexual desire peaks early, when common lens information (e.g., objective symmetry, consensual attractiveness) prominently impacts evaluations (Joel et al., 2017). Alternatively, intimacy and trust may be especially tightly linked to target-specific lens information; thus, these constructs emerge gradually because people have to accumulate target-specific information about how well they navigate interdependence challenges and diagnostic situations with this one particular partner (Reis & Shaver, 1988; Simpson, 2007).

Lenses as Affordances for Achieving Goals

Human mating can be illuminated by applying the concept of affordances (Gibson, 1979; Neel et al., 2016; Neuberg et al., 2020; Sng et al., 2020; Zebrowitz & Montepare, 2006), and MET's four lenses intersect with (and potentially extend) these ideas. According to an affordance-management framework, people attempt to identify the threats and opportunities afforded by other people in their social milieu, and these threats and opportunities differ depending on the features of the target, the chronic motives of the perceiver, and the relationship between the perceiver and target (Neuberg et al., 2020). These three concepts match three of MET's four lenses: Some targets have consensually agreed upon features that afford mating-relevant goals (i.e., common lens effects; Sng et al., 2020), people differ in the extent to which they have mate-seeking goals that are chronically activated (i.e., perceiver lens effects, Neel et al., 2016), and some perceivers may have goals that attune them toward the particular mating-relevant affordances of targets (i.e., feature lens effects; Lassetter et al., 2021). In our view, the target-specific lens would be a new addition to the affordance-management framework: As in the marathon-training goal-facilitation example above, a specific target may facilitate a perceiver's goal, but other targets with the same features cannot simply be "slotted in" to fill the role because the target's affordances derive in part from their unique history with the perceiver.

In this light, it becomes apparent that the existing experimental literature on mating contains two distinct forms of manipulations that are designed to boost mating-relevant motivations. One form primes a mating-motive that is not ostensibly tied to a particular target (e.g., reading a romantic/sexual story with imaginary characters; Griskevicius et al., 2007, 2009), and another form primes a mating-motive that is tied to a particular target (e.g., a closeness-inducing or arousing activity that participants engage in with one other person; Aron et al., 1997, 2000). A MET framework suggests that these are two distinct mechanisms, and that the effects of the first type of manipulation should generalize across targets more than the second. That is, the Aron et al. manipulations should presumably be more likely to operate via the target-specific lens than the Griskevicius et al. manipulations, and evidence for this suggestion would come from studies demonstrating that the Aron et al. effects apply only (or especially) to the target with whom the participant engaged in the closeness-inducing or arousing task.

How Does MET Intersect With Other Theories of Human Mating?

Close Relationships Theories

Most theories in the close relationships literature depict how constructs in memory (i.e., like MET's information store) intersect with ongoing interaction patterns and situationally salient variables (i.e., semantic concepts) to predict outcomes like intimacy, commitment, or satisfaction (i.e., an overall evaluation). MET can complement these existing theories in three meta-theoretical ways. First, MET's four lenses could be useful for categorizing and sorting the array of precursor variables that appear in a given close-relationships model. Consider the intimacy process model (Reis & Shaver, 1988). In this model, the success of a self-disclosure interaction is affected by factors such as (a) the discloser's general tendency to think that conversations are intimate (i.e., likely through

the perceiver lens), (b) the fact that a listener conveys more responsiveness by verbally elaborating on the disclosure (i.e., common lens), (c) the extent to which the listener likes providing nurturance in the wake of a disclosure (i.e., feature lens), and (d) fears of becoming too dependent on a specific relationship partner (i.e., target-specific lens). In this way, MET's clear, SRM-inspired definitions of the four lenses could provide a useful organizing framework for many existing models.

Second—reflecting its social-cognitive roots—MET is useful in emphasizing that relational dynamics flow through four distinct mechanisms to generate evaluative outcomes. For example, as explored in the Prediction #2 section above, MET can explain why a given compatibility effect emerges by appealing to distinct feature versus target-specific lens explanations, and it places a marker that the latter is likely to be larger than the former.

Third, MET explicitly incorporates the very early (i.e., initial attraction) moments of relationships; nearly all close-relationships theories begin after a relationship already exists. This whole-relationship view connects to the methodological recommendations we have discussed throughout this article: That relationships researchers should make greater efforts to study people and their relationships before their relationships begin, and they should expand the cadre of targets they ask participants to report on (Table 2). These approaches are surely easier to implement in attraction than close relationships contexts. But if they can be used more widely in the latter, close relationships researchers can begin to separate the schemas and tools people carry with them into all of their relationships from the emergent scripts and standards that develop in the context of one particular relationship.

Some close relationships models focus on specific evaluative constructs (e.g., commitment, Rusbult, 1980; intimacy, Reis & Shaver, 1988; trust, Rempel et al., 1985; love, Sternberg, 1986), whereas others depict the relations among broader classes of constructs (e.g., "enduring vulnerabilities," "relationship well-being"; Karney & Bradbury, 1995; Murray et al., 2006). MET is more like the latter than the former, and this approach has weaknesses and strengths. A weakness is that MET cannot by itself distinguish between constructs that fall *within* one of the four information store categories. So, for example, MET cannot explain why emotional stability predicts positive evaluations more strongly than openness (i.e., via the perceiver lens; Chopik & Lucas, 2019), or why support that is sensitive to the partner's autonomy (i.e., "soft" partner-regulation) is especially effective for avoidant but not anxious partners (i.e., via the feature lens; Overall et al., 2013). Other theories will be required to make these within-lens distinctions.

Conversely, a strength of MET is that it makes clear predictions about *between*-category differences, especially given the links between MET and variance-partitioning approaches. For example, the right pie chart in Figures 3 and 7 suggests that, in an established relationship, an actor effect for a given variable should be larger than its partner effect. Therefore, a researcher should expect to find that partner A's emotional stability is more strongly associated with A's relationship satisfaction than with partner B's satisfaction (Chopik & Lucas, 2019). Other patterns would be inconsistent with MET (e.g., if a partner effect were stronger than an actor effect for a given individual difference); such a pattern would suggest either that MET should be revised or that the finding merits additional scrutiny and replication.

Evolutionary Psychological Theories

Like MET, theories in evolutionary psychology extend beyond established close relationships; they address initial attraction and/or short-term relationships alongside established long-term relationships, for example (Buss & Schmitt, 1993; Gangestad & Simpson, 2000). These theories differ from MET, however, in that the theories were often designed to explain phenomena that reside at a higher level of abstraction (e.g., "desire for a large number of sex partners," which aggregates across time and partners) relative to the phenomena we examine here (i.e., a perceiver's evaluation of a specific target).

These theories are complementary to MET because they only sometimes imply evaluative mechanisms. Consider the association between men's lifetime number of sex partners and their fluctuating asymmetry, or FA (i.e., a marker of "good genes"), which is a key finding supporting strategic pluralism theory (Gangestad & Simpson, 2000). This association might emerge because of the way women evaluate low-FA men (i.e., a partner effect) or the way low-FA men evaluate women (i.e., an actor effect); MET could be useful in unpacking these possibilities. Alternatively, this association might be caused by mechanisms that take place prior to any evaluative opportunity (e.g., low FA-men are more likely to seek out situations where they might find sex partners); MET would have limited relevance to such a mechanism.

Nevertheless, there will be cases where MET conflicts with these prior theories, especially with respect to the constraints that the feature lens places on sex differences in attribute-evaluation dose-response associations. Consider the gender cliff in relative contribution to household income: It is far more common to find marriages in which the husband earns a bit more than his wife than marriages in which the wife earns a bit more than her husband (Bertrand et al., 2015). Why might this cliff emerge? An evaluative mechanism that relies on the feature lens is one possibility: Perhaps good earning capacity predicts romantic evaluations more strongly for women than for men, as predicted by sexual strategies theory (Buss & Schmitt, 1993). However, a second possibility (borne out by recent simulation work; Grow & Van Bavel, 2020) is that the gender cliff emerges if (a) good earning capacity predicts initial attraction equally strongly for both sexes (i.e., via the common lens), and (b) men outearn women on average, as they do in real life. According to Prediction #3 of MET, the second possibility is more likely than the first, especially in light of accumulating meta-analytic evidence that the Sex × Good Earning Capacity effect on romantic evaluations turns out to be very small ($q = .03$; Eastwick, Luchies, et al., 2014). In short, MET suggests that scholars might consider reexamining the mechanisms underlying aggregate patterns in human mating like the gender cliff in relative income; if those patterns rely on implied feature lens effects, there may be undiscovered alternative explanations for these patterns that do not rely on the feature lens.

MET's Lessons Beyond Human Mating

What About Relationships Outside the Field of Eligible Romantic Partners?

MET was designed to explain two puzzles in the literature in which perceivers make romantic evaluations, but whether these two puzzles are actually "puzzles" is less clear in studies where people

evaluate platonic targets (e.g., friendship contexts). Certainly, compatibility also seems to be crucial in friendships, as relationship variance is likely also the largest source of variance in nonromantic judgments (Branje et al., 2002; Giblin & Lakey, 2010; Kenny, 2020; Lakey et al., 1996, 2016, 2021). But attribute-matching effects might be cumulatively larger in platonic than romantic contexts: For example, similarity-attraction in friends (e.g., a classic attribute-matching effect) seems to be moderately sized (Bahns et al., 2017; van Zalk et al., 2020). Also, partner effects might be cumulatively larger in established friendships (Harris & Vazire, 2016; Kenny, 2020) than they are in established romantic relationships. Research that directly compares romantic and nonromantic contexts is rare (e.g., Berscheid et al., 1989), but it is plausible that motivational systems specific to sexual desire and the desire for exclusivity in long-term relationships could be key sources of the difference between the two forms of interpersonal evaluation (Kenrick et al., 2010; Neel et al., 2016; Platek & Shackelford, 2006).

Given that these puzzles may not apply to platonic contexts to the same extent, we recommended earlier that optimal tests of MET's predictions should use targets that come from a participant's field of eligibles. Nevertheless, the MET processes depicted in Figures 2 and 3 likely apply in broad strokes to platonic (e.g., friendship) evaluative judgments, in the sense that compatibility could also arise from a feature-based and target-specific source (i.e., Principle #1), and increasing acquaintance may cause perceivers to use target-specific lens information in lieu of common lens information (i.e., Principle #2). In other words, the MET process likely generalizes to nonromantic contexts, but the relative size of the pie slices in Figure 3 could differ considerably depending on the context, which could have consequences for the predictions that follow from the model. Notwithstanding this key caveat, researchers could certainly use targets outside the field of eligibles in MET-inspired designs, especially if they study one of the many psychological phenomena that generalizes across romantic and nonromantic contexts (e.g., social support, self-disclosure, etc.).

Broader Implications for Social Cognition

The general structure of MET should provide insights into other literatures, too, although (as in the platonic example) the relative prominence of the various lenses may shift. For example, the feature lens likely matters more in contexts where people evaluate targets they have not met: Several studies have demonstrated that ideal partner-preference matching has medium-sized effects when participants evaluate photographs and dating-website descriptions (e.g., Brandner et al., 2020; Brumbaugh & Wood, 2013; Eastwick & Smith, 2018; Eastwick et al., 2011; Wood & Brumbaugh, 2009). If we consider attitudinal contexts that are not interpersonal at all, the feature lens may account for even more variance. In fact, the idea that people exhibit stable individual differences in their preferences for certain features is captured by the "value" element of classic Expectancy × Value theories of attitudes toward objects like church or comprehensive exams (Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975; see Ledgerwood et al., 2018, for a review). Variance accounted for by the feature lens may shift dramatically depending on the evaluative context.

The prominent role of the target-specific lens in MET suggests new possible innovations for social-cognitive approaches, generally speaking. Models of person perception have long investigated how people make judgments about targets given knowledge about the target's abstract attributes or specific behaviors (e.g., social categories, emotional expressions; Fiske & Neuberg, 1990; Freeman & Ambady, 2011; Kunda & Thagard, 1996; Schneid et al., 2015). Yet incidental methodological decisions end up eliminating any possible role for target-specific lens information, as participants in these studies do not commonly have any dyadic, interactive history with the target of judgment. What if, in the real world, our impressions are mostly a function of the way we incorporate new information with our own episodic memories of prior interactions with specific targets? It seems plausible that exemplar-based models of impression formation (e.g., Smith, 1988, 1998; Smith & Zarate, 1992) could be expanded to incorporate memories of specific interactive episodes; the primary hurdle is that experimenters must figure out how to use idiographic information (i.e., each participant's personal interactive history with a particular target) to make nomothetic inferences (see Prediction #2 above). Yoked designs from the transference literature—in which one participant generates a set of attributes that forms a different participant's control condition—could serve as a template for how person-perception researchers could use people's real histories while retaining desired experimental control (e.g., Andersen & Baum, 1994; Andersen et al., 1996; Sparks et al., 2020). It seems plausible that the target-specific lens indeed holds relevance for other forms of (semantic or evaluative, romantic or platonic) social cognition, and by better incorporating participants' interactive histories, scholars can perhaps expand their collective understanding of how person perception works.

Conclusion

Evaluation has long been a critical driver of people's decisions to approach some partners and avoid others in their social milieu. MET is the first theory grounded in social-cognitive, person-perception, and evolutionary principles to describe how people construct evaluative judgments about potential or actual romantic partners. The theory explains two central puzzles in the mating literature: First, how can compatibility be a profound and vital component of human mating while "certain people evaluate certain other people positively" statistical models exhibit very small effect sizes? MET explains this conundrum by breaking relationship variance into two components—a component caused by the feature lens and a component caused by the target-specific lens—and predicting that the feature lens component is quite small and the target-specific component is quite large. Second, the theory explains how partner effects seem to be larger in initial attraction than established relationships contexts by positing that, as perceivers discover and create their own interpretations of a given target's traits, goals, beliefs, intentions (i.e., via the target-specific lens), the perceiving community's interpretations (i.e., the common lens) become less relevant for evaluative responses. Finally, the theory makes a variety of novel methodological recommendations (Table 2) and testable predictions (Table 3). Perhaps most important, MET offers a new tool to help scholars think about the psychological mechanisms underlying the formation and maintenance of human-mating relationships. In this way, MET situates empirical work in close relationships, evolutionary psychology, and person perception in the same conceptual plane—working toward the goal of creating a single coherent body of work.

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(*Appendix follows*)

Appendix

Key Terms and Examples

Key term	Definition	Examples	Part of the ...
Evaluation	A valenced judgment that varies from extremely positive to extremely negative; an attitude; extent of liking. Also: The sum of all activated evaluative elements	Romantic attraction; sexual desire; love; relationship satisfaction	
Mate	A member of one's preferred gender who could be—or who currently is—a sexual or romantic partner	Face-to-face initial interaction partner; an acquaintance; a friend; a current romantic partner, a sex partner	
Target effect	Consensus about a target's likeability in the SRM; generated by the use of common lens information	Popularity; sexual desirability	Overall evaluation
Perceiver effect	General liking tendencies of a given rater in the SRM; generated by the use of perceiver lens information	Misanthropy; selectivity; being "a liker of people"	Overall evaluation
Relationship effect	Liking above and beyond the target and perceiver effect in the SRM; generated by the use of feature and target-specific lens information	Unique liking; compatibility	Overall evaluation
Common lens	Information that derives from normative meaning-making processes that are shared within a given population of perceivers. This lens produces the target effect	Common cultural scripts; species-typical evaluative routines	Information store
Perceiver lens	Information that derives from individual differences and affects the way a perceiver views *all* targets. This lens produces the perceiver effect	Personality; expectations, chronic affect; dispositional positivity	Information store
Feature lens	Information that derives from individual differences and affects the way a perceiver views *some* targets—those who exhibit a particular feature. This lens produces the relationship effect (along with target-specific lens information)	Ideal partner preference-matching; similarity; Perceiver × Target statistical interactions; functional preferences	Information store
Target-specific lens	Information that derives from narrative, scripts, path-dependent history, and other mental routines that are bound to the context of *one* specific relationship. This lens produces the relationship effect (along with feature lens information)	Private knowledge of a target's personal history; relationship microculture; relationship-specific standard-matching	Information store
Semantic concepts	The perceiver's perception of the traits, goals, beliefs, intentions, and values of the target	Clever; expressing empathy; any judgment produced by the PERSON model (Kenny, 2004)	
Evaluative elements	The attitudinal (i.e., valenced) components that derive from the various activated semantic concepts	Liking associated with perceiving the target to be funny, play piano, or use "soft support" strategies	
Partner effect	The association between (a) an attribute that characterizes a target and (b) a perceiver's romantic evaluation of the target (i.e., APIM formulation; Cook & Kenny, 2005)	The effect of a target's mate value on a perceiver's attraction; the effect of one partner's neuroticism on the other partner's satisfaction	
Actor effect	The association between (a) an attribute that characterizes a perceiver and (b) the perceiver's romantic evaluation of a target (i.e., APIM formulation; Cook & Kenny, 2005)	The effect of a perceiver's mate value on their own attraction; the effect of one partner's neuroticism on their own satisfaction	

Note. SRM = Social Relations Model; APIM = actor–partner interdependence model.

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