How Ethnic Similarities and Socioeconomic Status Affect Dating Decisions in Romantic Relationships

Alena Atkinson

Algoma University
Abstract
This study examined whether certain principles from the Social Exchange Theory predicted the dating decisions of 36 university students when considering partners who differ in ethnic appearance. Two resources relevant to the Social Exchange Theory that were focused on were physical attraction and socioeconomic status. Participants engaged in a simulated speed dating experiment where they were asked to rate four possible dating partners on level of attractiveness, the likelihood to engage in a romantic relationship, and the likelihood to say “yes” to a second date. Participants were first presented with two photographs of partners who were similar in ethnic appearance and two photographs of partners who differed in ethnic appearance. After viewing the photographs, participants completed the supplementary questionnaire. Participants then read a description of the dating partner, which either suggested a high or low socioeconomic status and were asked to complete the supplementary questionnaire again. Results suggested that socioeconomic status had the greatest influence on the participant’s decision to enter a romantic relationship and the partner’s level of attractiveness. When compared to other variables, ethnic differences did not have an effect on the participant’s dating decisions.

Keywords: dating decisions, socioeconomic status, physical attraction, social exchange theory
Multiculturalism is an important part of Canadian history; recent statistics suggest that there has been a large increase of immigration into Canadian society (CIC, 2014). According to Statistic Canada in 2006, there were approximately 7.4 million couples in Canada and only 289,400 were mixed unions. Despite the relatively low number of mixed unions, this was a 33.1% increase since 2001 (Statistics Canada, 2011). Even though large spikes in interracial relationships have been observed over time, mixed unions only occupy 3.9% of all committed relationships (Chan, 2014). The purpose of this research is to examine the formation of interracial relationships in more detail and to identify why they are less prevalent than same race relationships in Canadian society.

There are several theories that attempt to explain the formation of romantic relationships. One widely used theory is the social exchange theory (SET). The rationale behind the social exchange theory is that each interaction with another person is based on an exchange of resources. Sprecher (1989) identified five main relationship resources; which included socioeconomic status (SES), affection, expression, physical attraction and companionship. The resources that are most valuable to an individual are evaluated through a cost/benefit analysis of partner attributes. The social exchange theory proposes that a person will base their decision on entering a relationship on whether or not the perceived benefits of the relationship outweigh the perceived costs.

For example, Sprecher (1985) found that resources like socioeconomic status and physical attraction had the biggest influence over an individual’s decision to enter a relationship. In their study, participants were significantly more likely to enter a relationship with someone who had a higher socioeconomic status and who was physically more attractive. These findings remain fairly consistent with recent literature in that often individuals who are physically more
attractive or earn a larger income are often associated with having other positive traits (Li et al, 2013). A study by Li et al. (2013) found that a partner’s social status was highly correlated with a suggestive interest in the dating partner. The researchers also noted that sex differences were present and that women found themselves more likely to date, and more interested in, partners who were of moderate socioeconomic status over men with low status. Moreover, men based their dating interest more on level of attractiveness than socioeconomic status.

Even though the social exchange theory has demonstrated that it is possible for a cost/benefit exchange to exist between partners, little research has taken into account how this might be influenced by a partner’s ethnic appearance. Research has touched upon various factors that could influence an individual’s decision to date outside their ethnicity but few studies have examined current populations. Some studies like, Murstein, Merighi, and Malloy (1998) found that interracial attraction could be influenced by a variety of factors including, an individual’s racial attitudes, demographic background and education level. However, Ross (2004) found contrasting results and that resources like, socioeconomic status and demographic background were not factors in the participants’ dating decisions. Additionally, results from Ross (2004) suggested that there was a strong same race preference between dating partners. Due to the differences in previous findings, it is evident that more research is needed in this area. Further research is required to accurately identify if ethnic similarities have an effect on the relationship resource exchange or perhaps, has no significant effect at all.

Reviewing the opposing literature on interpersonal relationships suggests a number of research questions: How do ethnic differences influence dating decisions? Are other relationship resources, like physical attraction and socioeconomic status more important in a relationship than ethnic similarities? Does ethnic appearance affect the dating decisions of men and women
differently? In my research, I will examine the dating preferences of men and women when considering partners who differ in ethnic appearance through the use of a speed dating experiment. First introduced by Kurzban and Weeden (2005), speed dating paradigms have become an increasingly popular tool to study dating decisions. Self-report studies may collect important information about a participant’s dating preferences, but this could change when in a scenario where a decision must be made (Li et al., 2013).

I hypothesize that participants will be more likely to engage in a romantic relationship with a partner who was of similar ethnic appearance than an individual who differed in ethnic appearance. I base this hypothesis on the relevant literature surrounding the “Familiarity Principle” which proposed that when we seek out a partner, we seek some who is similar to ourselves (Reis et al., 2011). I also hypothesize that perceptions of physical attractiveness will be unaffected by ethnic appearance. What is physically attractive is subjective, and I do not think levels of physical attractiveness will be influenced by ethnic appearance (Hadjistavropoulos & Genest, 1993). My third hypothesis is that participants will be more likely to engage in a romantic relationship with a partner who exhibits a high socioeconomic status, over an individual who exhibits a low socioeconomic status. I base this prediction on the results from previous studies that have found socioeconomic status to be highly influential in the dating decision (Sprecher, 1989). Consistent with previous literature, I hypothesize that gender differences will exist between dating decisions. I hypothesize that men will base their dating decision more heavily on the level of attractiveness of the female dating partner. Their decision to enter a relationship will not be effected by differences in ethnic appearance, nor socioeconomic status. I hypothesize that women will base their dating decision primarily on the socioeconomic status of the dating partner and not on the perceived differences in ethnic appearance.
Method

Participants

A convenience sample of 35 students (25 women, 10 men, $M_{\text{age}}=20.77$ years, age range: 18-46 years) from Algoma University was used. The majority of participants were enrolled in the introductory psychology class and received course credit for their participation in the experiment. All participants were recruited on a voluntary basis and were allowed to withdraw from the study at any time.

Materials and Procedure

Seventy-six photographs of potential dating partners were selected from a creative commons photo sharing website (e.g. www.flickr.com). All photographs were then pre-tested for average attractiveness by the seven students in the 2014 thesis class. The judges rated each photograph on level of attractiveness on a simple scale from 1 to 10 (e.g. 1=physically unattractive, 10=highly attractive). From the 76 photographs, 16 were selected for the speed dating experiment. These photographs included eight women and eight men, two photographs from four different racial groups (i.e., Caucasian, African, Hispanic, Asian). The average attractiveness for each of the 16 photographs of the dating partners is depicted in Table 1.

The experiment was a 2 x 2 mixed design. The independent variables included ethnic appearance (similar vs. different) and socioeconomic status (low vs. high). Participants received two photographs of individuals who were similar in ethnic appearance and two photographs of a partner who differed in ethnic appearance. Socioeconomic status was manipulated by altering the current education level of the dating partner as well as their occupation (Appendix A). The dependent variables were measured in the supplementary questionnaire and were the
participants’ likelihood to engage in a romantic relationship with the dating partner, the likelihood to say, “yes” to a second date and level of physical attractiveness (Appendix B).

**Table 1**

**Mean Ratings of Attractiveness for Dating Partners**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sex</th>
<th>Caucasian</th>
<th>Asian</th>
<th>African</th>
<th>Hispanic</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>7.71</td>
<td>5.14</td>
<td>6.85</td>
<td>6.85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>8.42</td>
<td>6.85</td>
<td>7.14</td>
<td>6.28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>7.28</td>
<td>6.42</td>
<td>6.14</td>
<td>7.85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>6.57</td>
<td>5.57</td>
<td>6.28</td>
<td>6.85</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Prior to conducting the study, participants were asked to complete a demographic questionnaire, which collected general information about the participant. Key questions in the demographic questionnaire included: What ethnicity do you most commonly identify with? What sexual orientation do you most commonly identify with? The participants’ response to these two key questions determined which dating partners they would receive. Eighty-five percent of participants identified as being heterosexual, 5.7% as bi-sexual, 5.7% did not specify and 3.3% did not specify. Forty-five percent of participants commonly identified as Caucasian, 22.8% as Canadian, 5.7% as Japanese, 20% identified as other, and 2.6% did not specify.

When participants entered the experiment room they were asked to complete a general dating preference survey about their current relationship, and to identify the important characteristics they seek in a partner. Forty percent of the participants listed their marital status
as single and 60% of participants were currently in a relationship. After completing the dating preference survey, participants then moved on to the speed dating experiment.

In the speed dating experiment, participants were presented with a photograph of a possible dating partner who was either similar or differed in ethnic appearance to the participant, based on the previously administered demographic questionnaire. Each participant was allotted up to three minutes to answer a supplementary questionnaire pertaining to the photograph. The supplementary questionnaire contained three Likert-scale questions (e.g., How physically attractive do you find the individual in the photograph) on a 10-scale rating (e.g., 1=highly unlikely, 10=more than likely). Participants then read a brief description of the dating partner. This description included the current occupation of the dating partner, their education level and a few personal interests. Once the participant had reviewed the description, participants completed the supplementary questionnaire again. After three minutes had elapsed, the experimenter rang a bell and the participant moved seat to the next photograph. This process was repeated for all four dating partners.

After completing the speed dating portion of the experiment, participants then completed two final questionnaires. The first questionnaire was a relationship scenario package that was modeled after the Korolewics Interracial Dating Preference Questionnaire (Ross, 2004). It was a condensed version of the K-IDPQ that contained four relationship scenarios, two consisting of partners of a different race and two of partners of the same race. The participants read each scenario and then were asked to answer five questions pertaining to the scenario (e.g., How would you feel if you were participating in this situation? How would you feel if one of your
relatives was participating in this situation? How would you feel seeing two strangers in this situation? How would you feel if a friend were participating in this situation? How do you think your parents would feel if you were participating in this situation?) on a four point scale (e.g., 1=strongly not prefer, 4=strongly prefer). Results from the K-IDPQ will not be analyzed due to poor instrument measures. In order to complete the experiment, participants were asked to complete an interracial attitude survey that assessed their personal attitudes towards interracial couples. Due to a negative imbalance of questions, the results from the interracial attitude survey will also not be analyzed.

Results

A one-way analysis of variance was used with the level of physical attractiveness as the dependent variable. The between subjects variables included, socioeconomic status of the four dating partners (low, high) as well as the ethnic appearance (similar, different). In this analysis, the effect of socioeconomic status was significant \(F(1,3) = 25.87, p < .001\) on ratings of physical attractiveness but there was no effect of ethnic appearance \(F(1,3) = 0.67, p > .05\). There was also no significant interaction between the ethnic appearance x socioeconomic status \(F(1,3)=0.84, p > .05\) on physical attractiveness (Table 2). Refer to Figure 1, Appendix C for a graph of the results.
Table 2

One Way Analysis of Variance

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Degrees of Freedom</th>
<th>Mean Square</th>
<th>F-value</th>
<th>Significance</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Socioeconomic Status</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>93.645</td>
<td>25.874</td>
<td>.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ethnic Appearance</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2.445</td>
<td>.675</td>
<td>.413</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Socioeconomic Status x Ethnic Appearance</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>.145</td>
<td>.40</td>
<td>.842</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

$r^2 = 0.164$

My second hypothesis was that participants would be more likely to engage in a romantic relationship with a partner who was of similar ethnic appearance than an individual who differed in ethnic appearance. I used a one way analysis of variance with the likelihood of saying, “yes” to a second date as the dependent variable. The between subject variables included, the socioeconomic status of the four dating partners (low, high) and ethnic appearance (similar, different). Socioeconomic status had a significant effect $F(1,3) = 31.71, p < 0.001$ on the likelihood to say “yes” to a second date, but there was no significant effect of ethnic appearance $F(1,3) = 0.27$. Furthermore, there were no significant findings of an interaction between the ethnic appearance x socioeconomic status $F(1,3) = 0.27$ on the likelihood of saying, “yes” to a second date (Table 3). Refer to Figure 2, Appendix C for a graph of the results.
Table 3

One Way Analysis of Variance

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Degrees of Freedom</th>
<th>Mean Square</th>
<th>F-value</th>
<th>Significance</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Socioeconomic Status</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>165.029</td>
<td>31.713</td>
<td>.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ethnic Appearance</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1.400</td>
<td>.269</td>
<td>.605</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Socioeconomic Status x Ethnic Appearance</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1.400</td>
<td>.269</td>
<td>.605</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

$r^2 = 0.192$

My third hypothesis that participants will be more likely to engage in a romantic relationship with a partner who exhibits a high socioeconomic status, over an individual who exhibits a low socioeconomic status was supported by the findings of this study. In this analysis, there was a significant effect of socioeconomic status $F(1,3) = 37.12, p < .001$ on the likelihood to engage in a romantic relationship, but the effect of ethnic appearance $F(1,3) = 1.27$ was not significant. Once again, there was no significant interaction between the ethnic appearance x socioeconomic status $F(1,3) = 0.544$ (Table 4). Refer to Figure 3, Appendix C for a graph of the results.
Table 4

One Way Analysis of Variance

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Degrees of Freedom</th>
<th>Mean Square</th>
<th>F-value</th>
<th>Significance</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Socioeconomic Status</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>176.064</td>
<td>37.115</td>
<td>.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ethnic Appearance</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>6.007</td>
<td>1.266</td>
<td>.262</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Socioeconomic Status x Ethnic Appearance</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2.579</td>
<td>.544</td>
<td>.462</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

$r^2 = 0.223$

Results from the dating preference survey indicated that the most important characteristics in a partner were personality (42.9%, n=16) followed by chemistry (17.2%, n=6) and friendship, (14.3%, n=5). In contrast, the least important characteristics in a partner included religious values (45.7%, n=16), wealth (37.1%, n=13) and sense of humor (8.6%, n=3). The results from the participants’ dating decisions can possibly be explained by their initial dating preferences. For example, the ethnic appearance of the dating partner did not have an effect on any of the dependent variables. This could be due to the fact that ethnic appearance is not a reflection of the dating partner’s personality.

**Discussion**

I initially hypothesized that the perceptions of physical attractiveness would be unaffected by ethnic differences. This hypothesis was supported. The results indicated that differences in ethnic appearance did not affect the perceptions of physical attractiveness. Surprisingly, the only variable that significantly influenced the participant’s ratings of attractiveness was socioeconomic status. If the dating partner was of high socioeconomic status, they received significantly higher ratings of physical attractiveness, than a dating partner who
was of low socioeconomic status. These findings are consistent with previous findings of the strong influence of socioeconomic status on dating decisions (Li et al., 2013).

My second hypothesis was also supported and the results demonstrated that likelihood to say, “yes” to a second date was unaffected by the ethnic appearance. There was no significant difference observed in the likelihood to say “yes” to a second date for daters who differed in ethnic appearance. However, socioeconomic status significantly influenced the participant’s dating decision. If the dating partner was of relatively low socioeconomic status, the participant was significantly less likely to say “yes” to a second date with them. Finally, my third hypothesis was supported in that socioeconomic status strongly influenced the participants’ dating decisions. If the dating partner was of high socioeconomic status, participants were significantly more likely to engage in a relationship with that dating partner than a partner of low status. Furthermore, differences in ethnic appearance did not influence an individual’s likelihood to engage in a romantic relationship. The likelihood to engage in romantic relationship did not differ when participants were presented with photographs of people of a similar ethnic appearance or different ethnic appearance. These findings contradict those from Ross (2004) as in his study; as there were strong same race preferences among participants.

The overall results from this study are consistent with previous literature on the strong influence of socioeconomic status on dating decisions. Across all dependent variables, socioeconomic status directly affected the participant’s rating of physical attractiveness, likelihood to engage in a romantic relationship and likelihood to say, “yes” to a second date. This finding highlights the importance that socioeconomic status plays when selecting a partner.
However, the surprising result from this study is that there was no effect of ethnic differences at all. These findings contradict those from Ross (2004), as the results from the current study were almost the same for partners of similar and different ethnic appearance. This finding is important to note due to the fact that ethnic appearance does not hinder how likely one is to engage in a relationship or how physically attractive they are.

There are a few limitations to this study and its findings. Foremost, study featured a relatively low sample size with only 10 males and 25 females. A larger population might yield more significant results indicating that ethnic similarities could be important in the dating decisions. In addition, explicitly stating the ethnicity of the dating partner in the description might have made ethnic differences more apparent. Furthermore, this study was conducted on university students variably around the same age. As a university student, socioeconomic status might be more important than individuals who are not enrolled in post-secondary studies.

**Conclusion**

Further research should continue to research interpersonal relationships that involve individuals of different ethnicities because they are becoming increasingly more prevalent in today’s society. This study focused on potentially explaining this finding by one specific theory, but the lack of significant results suggests that there could be other motivations behind engaging in an interracial relationship that should be explored.
References


Appendix A

Male Descriptions

LOW Ben is 23 years old and currently lives with his mother and two younger siblings. He takes interest in video games and music. Jim is currently working part-time at a convenient store while taking night classes at a local college. In the future, Jim hopes to open his own music store.

HIGH Danny is 21 years old and currently lives off campus with his two friends. He spends the majority of his time at school, splitting his time between homework and tutoring kids in math. Danny was accepted to graduate school for finance and plans on moving to Toronto in the fall. When he finds spare time, he likes to play pool and hang out with his friends.

HIGH Marcus is 22 years old and is currently in University studying engineering but was also granted a full ride soccer scholarship. He spends the majority of his time training for games and was nominated for Athlete of the Year. In the summer, Marcus plans on interning at a large engineering corporation in Ottawa. When he finds free time, he enjoys sitting at home watching TV.

LOW Michael is 20 years old and lives alone in a small one-bedroom apartment. Michael only completed one semester of university before pursuing other ventures. He is currently working part time at a call center. When he’s not working part time, he likes to cook and hopes to take a few culinary classes at the local college in the summer.

Female Descriptions

HIGH Christina is 22 years old and is living at home. She has recently completed a double major in Business and Finance and was offered an internship at an accounting firm in Toronto. In her spare time, Christina prefers to relax at home with her siblings instead of partying.

LOW Erika is 19 years old and lives alone in a small one-bedroom apartment. Erika dropped out of university after one semester and is currently working full time at a banquet hall. When she’s not working full time, she likes to cook and hopes to take a few culinary classes at the local college.

HIGH Adrienne is 21 years old and currently lives off campus with her three friends. She spends the majority of her time at school, splitting her time between working as a T.A and tutoring students. In the fall, she plans on going to graduate school for clinical psychology. In her spare time, she likes to eat out with friends and catch a movie.

LOW Charlie is 23 years old and currently lives with her dad, stepmother and her two children. She is currently working part-time as a waitress while taking night classes at a local college. In her spare time, Charlie likes to paint and hopes to own a gallery some day.
Appendix B

Supplementary Questionnaire
Please answer the following 3 questions to the best of your ability:

ID Number: ____________________________

1. After viewing the selected dating partner, how physically attractive do you find this individual on a scale of 1 to 10? Please circle.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
<th>6</th>
<th>7</th>
<th>8</th>
<th>9</th>
<th>10</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Not Attractive</td>
<td>Average</td>
<td>Very Attractive</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

2. After viewing the selected dating partner, how likely would you be to engage in a romantic relationship with them?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
<th>6</th>
<th>7</th>
<th>8</th>
<th>9</th>
<th>10</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Not likely</td>
<td>Maybe</td>
<td>More than likely</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

3. After viewing the photograph of the selected dating partner, how likely would you be to say “yes” or “no” to a second date? Please circle.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
<th>6</th>
<th>7</th>
<th>8</th>
<th>9</th>
<th>10</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Not likely</td>
<td>Maybe</td>
<td>More than likely</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Figure 1. Physical Attractiveness Ratings

Figure 2.
Figure 2. Likelihood of Saying, “yes” to a Second Date

Figure 3.
Figure 3. Likelihood to Engage in Romantic Relationship