Two women sit in a café discussing a recent breakup, when one woman looks the other in the eye and says, "Do you think I'll ever meet the perfect person for me?" Her question is the one single people everywhere can't help asking.

For Dr. Norman Li, assistant professor in the Department of Psychology, the answer to that question is not much different from the answer to whether the woman will ever buy the perfect car or take the perfect vacation or live in the perfect home: It's largely a matter of budgets.

Li argues that finding a mate is essentially a matter of budget allocation, balancing what you have to offer and what you hope to find. We each have a budget, determined by the qualities we bring into the mating game, be they good looks, generosity, kindness or an impressive job. That budget determines who's available to us as a potential partner.

"How desirable you are to mates is essentially your budget," Li says. "It enables you to choose. As a lot of us find out, if we max out on one characteristic in our 'spending,' we've probably traded off something else, which we find out later on, is lacking or problematic in the relationship."

Trade-offs and cost-benefit analyses are necessary because few of us have the high mate values of a celebrity like Brad Pitt. Most of us are just normal people with limited budgets. Li finds the economic model useful in considering how people choose their mates, and it's a model that comes naturally to him.

Li worked in finance for a number of years, analyzing investment portfolios and even working the trading floor in Chicago. An interest in psychology drew him back into the classroom, and eventually he left the finance world altogether and earned a doctor's degree in psychology, becoming an expert in the world of mating instead.

"I was surprised to discover there was a subject of study about everything I normally think about anyway," he says. "I chose the area of mate selection to focus on: Why are people attracted to each
other? Why does it work between this person and that person but not between him and someone else?"

Li's work is rooted in the evolutionary perspective of psychology. In a nutshell, evolutionary psychology says our behaviors are influenced by an unconscious drive to pass our genes on to the next generation. That means men are driven to seek out women whom they perceive as fertile, and women are driven to seek out men who have the resources or status to provide for a child.

"In the evolutionary past, the environment was pretty tough, and perhaps in different ways for men and women," Li says. "This has meant that men and women have some very basic differences in what they prioritize in long-term mates and marriage partners."

Those differences remain today. When looking at heterosexuals, men place far more initial emphasis on physical attractiveness when choosing a mate than women do. Women prioritize a man's resource-providing ability. But Li found that while these things are true, they are far from absolutes. He wanted to find a way to get at just how important these attributes are.

"If I say, design your ideal mate and I give you a list of characteristics, and you can choose on a scale of 1-10, you might pick a nine or 10 in everything," Li says. "But for most of us, that's not realistic. I designed a budget allocation program to really flesh out the priorities people have in choosing a mate."

Li asked individuals to design their ideal mates, selecting between a number of different categories, including physical attractiveness and social status, but also creativity, kindness, trustworthiness and other characteristics. The catch was that they had limited budgets to choose with, meaning that selecting a higher level in one characteristic may mean they have to settle for a lower level of another.

"The budget forces people to make those tough choices, especially if you give people a low budget," he says. "If I want to find out what the first thing you look for is, that fleshes it out."

The system allowed Li to determine how priorities change as budgets change. He found that physical attractiveness is a necessity for men and resources for women, but that as budgets increased, individuals didn't necessarily demand higher levels of attractiveness and resources. Once an initial threshold has been crossed, men and women both turn to other traits.

"Ideally, both men and women would like a well-rounded mate," Li says, "somebody who is not only attractive or has a reasonable job, but who is funny and kind and intelligent, too. But men and women have different priorities."

This is true with one important exception: short-term relationships. Call them trysts, affairs, flings or something more of-the-moment—whatever the name, people still get into relationships that they have no intention of making permanent. Men are more likely to engage in short-term relationships than women are. But when a woman does choose a short-term relationship, her priorities shift. In fact, her priorities are more like a man's.

For short-term mates, physical attractiveness is a necessity for both sexes, Li found. Other characteristics may be important or influential, but they are less critical than physical attractiveness. Both sexes would choose a short-term mate who was moderate on attractiveness and vitality over one who was moderate or high on

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warmth and trustworthiness.

“They’re both prioritizing physical attractiveness, but when we ask them what features they are looking for, they tend to differ,” Li says.

What men look for is correlated with what researchers have shown are markers of fertility and youth, including soft skin, full lips, big eyes and a low waist-to-hip ratio. For women, the indicators are more closely associated with masculinity and masculinity. They unconsciously look for facial symmetry and features related to higher testosterone levels, including square jaws and deep-set eyes. For both sexes, body and build are more important for short-term relationships than for long-term ones.

Isn’t this rather bleak, Li is often asked, this act of considering ourselves simply genetically driven creatures? What about love at first sight? What about flowers and chocolate? What about being swept off your feet? What about soul mates?

Have them all, Li says. Just because we look at the science behind our relationship choices doesn’t mean we can’t indulge in romance.

“Just because there’s a science behind what we do doesn’t mean we can’t enjoy it,” Li says. “Just because we know we’re taking in food to convert into energy doesn’t mean we can’t enjoy what we eat. The same is true here.

“I say if you want to know what underlies your motives, then this is what it is. But if you want to fall in love, nothing’s preventing you from doing it.”

But don’t be surprised if you do it a lot, Li says. In our modern world, people have the opportunity to meet an unprecedented number of people every day, between the Internet and the quantity of social environments we can frequent. Our mating choices can seem endless, and the possibility of comparing alternatives never ends.

In fact, we’re inundated with images of potential mates ready to make us swoon, or stray. Li says studies have shown that if a man views photos of attractive women, he rates himself as having lower commitment to his current partner. The same is true if women read about successful, socially dominant men.

How, then, do we find the perfect mate, that question the woman in the café asked with such seriousness? Li says we come to understand both our own mating budgets and what we are looking for. Basically, then, we recognize a bargain when we see it.

“True love or feelings of soulmateship occur when each person in a pair inherently feels he or she is getting a good deal,” Li says. “You perceive this person is clearly above all of your other options, and the other person simultaneously thinks that way, too.”

BY Vivé Griffith

Photo of Dr. Li: Christina Murrey

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