

What dissociating different forms of attraction can tell us about the human experience of desire and partnership

Background

Attraction is a fundamental human experience that forges bonds between individuals, serving for centuries as the traditional foundation of partnership, love, and companionship. While most people intuitively "know" what attraction feels like, contemporary research and the growing visibility of the Asexual Spectrum have challenged the assumption that it is a single, monolithic force.

asexual or aromantic, we have started to decouple sexual desire from romantic attachment (Antonsen et al., 2020; Scheller et al., 2024). This shift in understanding reveals that attraction is not a singular spark, but a complex interplay of independent psycho-biological systems. Recognizing these distinct drives allows us to better characterize how our behaviors and partner preferences are shaped - not just by a biological urge to reproduce, but by a sophisticated suite of psychobiological motivations.

To study and characterize attraction as a multi-component process (Winer, 2025), we will merge objective, behavioral metrics with phenomenological (subjective) reports. This integrated approach treats attraction not as a single feeling but as distinct motivational forces that can run in parallel, overlap, or diverge. Combining measures of subjective reports of sexual desires and romantic limerence with behavioural markers (e.g. eye-tracking) and explicit goal-directed intentions, we can derive a more holistic understanding of how different forms of attraction manifest in feeling, behaviour, and function.

Aims and Methods

The aim of the project is to characterise and gain a deeper understanding of attraction, its experiential, behavioural, and motivational factors. To study attraction as a multi-dimensional, rather than monolithic construct, we will move from general "liking" scales to a more multi-methodological dissociation framework. This involves leveraging the Split Attraction Model (SAM) in psychometric testing to separate the desire for physical intimacy from the drive for emotional pair-bonding. This can be done, for instance, by studying "discordant" populations, such as asexual or cross-oriented individuals, where these systems naturally diverge. We can further utilize behavioural tasks such as eye-

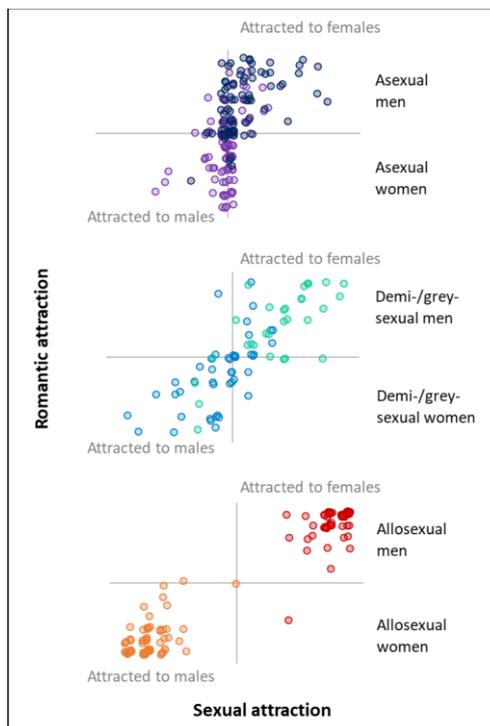


Figure 1: Scatter plots showing sexual and romantic attraction intensity towards men and women, indicating alignment of sexual and romantic attraction in the majority of allosexual individuals (bottom), but increasing discrepancy in asexual individuals (top), with intermediate alignment for demi-/grey-sexual individuals (Data taken from Scheller et al., 2024)

By incorporating the diverse lived experiences of those whose desires do and do not align with typical heterosexual scripts, such as those who identify as

tracking or resource allocation tasks, with the aim to distinguish between different forms of attraction via gaze-patterns or value hierarchies. Ultimately, characterizing attraction requires viewing it not as a single feeling, but as a suite of independent psycho-biological mechanisms, which manifest differently in different markers.

Relevance

The project addresses fundamental questions about human experiences of attraction and desire, and bridges interests and expertise of various psychology-related disciplines, including social psychology, biopsychology, sexology, and evolutionary psychology.

Training

The candidate's research activity will be based in Durham, Psychology. Besides a training in general research skills, the candidate will develop a deeper understanding of studying lived experiences through multi-measure approaches, including experimental, behavioural tasks, questionnaires, and subjective experience reports. The candidate will receive training in design, methodology and analysis, depending on the individual needs.

Suitable for

PhD and MSc by Research students.

References and Further Read

Antonsen A.N., Zdaniuk B., Yule M., & Brotto L.A.. 2020: Ace and Aro: Understanding Differences in Romantic Attractions Among Persons Identifying as Asexual. *Archives of Sexual Behaviour*. 49(5):1615-1630.

Scheller, M., de Sousa, A. A., Brotto, L. A., & Little, A. C., 2024: The Role of Sexual and Romantic Attraction in Human Mate Preferences. *The Journal of Sex Research*, 61(2), 299–312.

Winer, C., 2025: Splitting Attraction: Differentiating Romantic and Sexual Orientations Among Asexual Individuals. *Social Currents*, 12(3), 215-230.