

Happy couples experience perceptual downgrading of attractive alternate partners

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Many researchers have asked why people cheat on their partners. Shana Cole asked how they stay together. Credit: Rutgers University

Men and women cheat on their partners. That's no surprise. But how is it that many couples stay faithful?

One reason, say [researchers](#) from Rutgers and New York University, may be related to an unconscious "turn-off" mechanism: People in committed relationships adjust their view of threatening, [attractive](#) individuals – perceiving them to be less attractive than they really are.

This protective bias – shared by both men and women – that helps [people](#) maintain commitment to their current partners is called "perceptual downgrading," a term researchers Shana Cole, an assistant

professor of psychology in Rutgers' School of Arts and Sciences, and her co-authors, Yaacov Trope and Emily Balcetis of New York University, use to describe the phenomenon in a paper published June 6 in the *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*.

"When people encounter an enticing temptation, one way to reduce its motivational pull is to devalue the temptation," says Shana Cole, lead author of the study. "Committed individuals see other potential partners as less attractive than other people see them, especially if they see the attractive person as a threat to their relationship, and even more so if they're happy with their partner."

To conduct their study, the researchers first showed a group of 54 heterosexual adults two male and two female arrays of faces. Each array consisted of 11 images – one original image, and 10 images of the same face manipulated with special software to make the face more or less attractive.

The faces varied on things like symmetry and evenness of skin tone, qualities previous research has shown to be associated with attractiveness. When the researchers asked participants to pick a face they liked, they consistently picked the faces morphed toward attractiveness. "That told us we were on the right track with our task," Cole says.

The researchers then set up two additional studies designed to answer two related questions: Do people in relationships perceptually downgrade attractive people who are potential threats to their relationships? And are they more likely to do that if they are highly satisfied with their current partners?

In the first study, the researchers told participants that they would be working with a very attractive – but, unknown to the participants,

entirely imaginary – person. Sometimes the researchers let the subjects know this person was in a relationship and, thus, romantically unavailable; sometimes, they let them know he or she was single. The researchers asked the subjects some questions about themselves, including questions about their own romantic status. Eventually, they were shown the imaginary person's face with its 10 morphed images and asked to pick the image that matched the original. They consistently picked images morphed toward unattractiveness.

In the second study, the participants provided more information about their own romantic situations, and Cole and her colleagues always described the imaginary person as single, and therefore, available. They also told participants whether the person was interested in finding a partner. Participants in relationships who thought the person was interested in dating found that person less attractive than single people with the same information. People who were in relationships and who were happy in those relationships, perceived the imaginary person as less attractive than any other [participants](#).

"We often hear about the reasons why people cheat or divorce and we spend less time exploring the factors that help people stay together," Cole says. "This study suggests that there are processes that may occur outside of conscious awareness to make it easier to stay committed to one's partner."

More information: S. Cole et al. In the Eye of the Betrothed: Perceptual Downgrading of Attractive Alternative Romantic Partners, *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* (2016). [DOI: 10.1177/0146167216646546](https://doi.org/10.1177/0146167216646546)

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