Functionally Calibrating Life Satisfaction: The Case of Mating Motives and Self-Perceived Mate Value

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Abstract
Extending the growing literature on adaptive functionality of inner experiential states, we take the approach that life satisfaction functions as a part of a psychological system that monitors current and potential achievement on important goals. From this perspective, life satisfaction is sensitively calibrated to how well one is moving toward success on important goals, thereby providing useful information for, and potentially motivating, subsequent goal-facilitating action. Focusing on mating goals, we investigated whether currently active and important mating goals shape the extent to which life satisfaction is sensitively and selectively calibrated by goal-specific cues of potential mating success—self-perceived mate value. As hypothesized, because most individuals (eventually) seek long-term committed relationships, self-perceived long-term mate value predicted life satisfaction for men and women regardless of relationship status. In contrast, and also as hypothesized, self-perceived short-term mate value predicted life satisfaction only for individuals with short-term casual mating goals—single uncommitted men (Studies 1, 2 A, and 2B), individuals dispositionally motivated toward short-term relationships (Studies 2 A and 2B), and single uncommitted women for whom short-term mating motivation was experimentally engaged, enabling causal inference (Study 3). Results support a functional conceptualization of life satisfaction, showing that currently active mating goals can shape the extent to which goal-specific self-perceived mate value predicts life satisfaction.

Keywords Life satisfaction · Mate value · Mating motivation · Functional approach · Calibration
People frequently audit their life satisfaction (Diener, 2000). Why do people engage in this evaluation? Does life satisfaction serve important functions, or is it merely an end in itself? We explore the view that life satisfaction, like other subjective affective and cognitive states, functions as part of a psychological system that monitors current and potential achievement on important goals. From this functional perspective, the phenomenology of life satisfaction provides a useful indicator of how well one is moving toward or meeting one’s goals, thereby providing useful information for, and potentially motivating, subsequent desirable action. In fact, life satisfaction precedes many adaptive behaviors often leading to success (Luhmann et al., 2013; Lyubomirsky et al., 2005).

The main aim of the current paper is to investigate the putative first stage of this functional process—whether currently active and important goals shape the extent to which life satisfaction is sensitively and selectively calibrated by goal-specific cues of success, especially for goals fundamental to reproductive fitness (Kenrick et al., 2010; Neel et al., 2016). We focus in this research on mating motives and on cues people may use to assess their likely success in addressing them—self-perceived mate value.

The mating domain is especially valuable for exploring nuanced hypotheses about the calibration of life satisfaction. Specifically, mate value takes different forms depending on whether one is motivated toward long-term committed versus short-term casual-sex relationships, and these different mating goals tend to be differently relevant to men and women and to people with different relationship statuses. Thus, the life satisfaction of people seeking a long-term committed relationship is likely to be calibrated to self-perceived long-term mate value, whereas the life satisfaction of people seeking short-term casual-sex relationships is likely to be calibrated to self-perceived short-term mate value. The nuances inherent in the hypothesized associations among different forms of self-perceived mate value and life satisfaction—as somewhat differently manifest for men and women and for persons with different relationship statuses—are not readily derived by other conceptual approaches.

1 A Functional Approach to Life Satisfaction

Life satisfaction is a subjective, cognitive evaluation of one’s life as a whole (Diener et al., 1985). Although the common view is that most people seek to maximize life satisfaction, from an evolutionary perspective humans are not designed to do so, per se. Rather, life satisfaction is likely one component of a behavioral regulation mechanism shaped by natural selection (Nesse, 1990). Like other inner experiential states that are of pervasive concern to people (e.g., self-esteem, self-regard, self-actualization, self-consistency; Kenrick et al., 2010; Leary, 2007; Leary et al., 1995; Mahadevan et al., 2018), life satisfaction can be viewed partially as functioning both to indicate one’s success or failure on active, psychologically prominent goals and to facilitate further adaptive desirable behaviors. For instance, self-esteem is now widely viewed as an interpersonal monitor that gauges an individual’s level of social acceptance and, thus, ultimately serves roles in regulating social inclusion (Kirkpatrick et al., 2002; Leary et al., 1995; Leary & Baumeister, 2000). Such a psychological mechanism dedicated to tracking one’s success or failure, aggregating broadly across fundamental social challenges and then facilitating functionally valuable actions, would be of great adaptive benefit.
Indeed, the experience of life satisfaction seems to be tied to movement towards important personal goals (Hofer & Chasiotis, 2003; Schimmack et al., 2002; Schultheiss et al., 2008). For example, possessing greater resources predicts higher life satisfaction, but only to the extent that these resources help people achieve their goals (Carver & Scheier, 1990; Diener & Fujita, 1995). Moreover, when people succeed in domains unrelated to their active goals, they tend not to receive a boost in life satisfaction (Brunstein et al., 1998; Diener et al., 1995).

Some goals, on average, are more fundamental than others. As an ultra-social species (Richerson & Boyd, 1998), humans have long had to solve many recurrent social challenges, such as evading physical harm, avoiding disease, making friends, attaining status, acquiring mates, retaining mates, and caring for family (Kenrick et al., 2010; Neel et al., 2016; Neuberg et al., 2010). Each fundamental social challenge engages qualitatively distinct motivational systems that employ cognitive, affective, and behavioral mechanism to identify and manage goal-specific opportunities and threats (Neuberg & Schaller, 2015). That is, different social challenges selectively activate different motivational systems, which in turn selectively process goal-specific cues and information toward enabling people to generate goal-facilitating outcomes (Barrett & Kurzban, 2006). This conceptual approach implies that currently important and salient goals should selectively calibrate life satisfaction in response to goal-specific cues and information.

2 Mating Goals and Life Satisfaction

The acquisition and retention of mates is fundamental to survival and reproductive fitness. It is thus not surprising that establishing and maintaining a committed relationship predicts robust, long-lasting high life satisfaction (Diener et al., 2000; Luhmann et al., 2012). On the functional view, however, life satisfaction should be calibrated not only to actual mating success but also to cues suggesting whether one is likely, in the future, to succeed in acquiring and retaining mates.

One important cue to future mating success is mate value (Back et al., 2011; Bugental, 2000; Waynforth, 2001). Individuals with high mate value—who have qualities desired by potential romantic partners relative to mating competitors—are more likely to succeed (relative to those with lower mate value) in securing romantic partners of high mate value and in increasing reproductive success (Conroy-Beam et al., 2019; Gangestad & Simpson, 2000). Although people desire partners of the highest possible mate value, most people in practice end up with partners similar to them in mate value (Conroy-Beam & Buss, 2016; Luo & Klohnen, 2005). This implies that people have a relatively accurate sense of both their own and others’ mate value and, in turn, calibrate their mating aspirations, preferences, strategies, and efforts to their self-perceived mate value in ways to increase mating success (Buston & Emlen, 2003; Maner & Miller, 2014; Penke et al., 2007).

Mating is a fundamental concern to nearly all people at some point in their lives. Because mate value has such significant implications for mating success, if life satisfaction indeed has functional significance for goal achievement, one would expect life satisfaction to be calibrated to self-perceived mate value.
3 The Significance of Mate Value for Life Satisfaction is likely to Vary by Mating Goal

Mate value is a useful cue of future mating success and is thus likely to shape life satisfaction. However, there exist substantial individual differences in how frequently and strongly motivated people are to achieve mating goals and in how people seek to do so. Some of these differences are linked to one’s mating strategy—for example, whether one is motivated to seek a long-term committed relationship versus a short-term uncommitted sexual opportunity. Individuals’ motivation for these specific mating strategies are partially shaped by features such as sex and relationship status.

3.1 Sex

Men and women confront somewhat different adaptive problems in short-term versus long-term mating relationships (Clark & Hatfield, 1989; Gangestad & Simpson, 2000; Oliver & Hyde, 1993). The potential reproductive costs of less selective short-term mating are relatively higher for women than for men (Trivers, 1972). This is because reproduction requires a relatively higher minimal obligatory investment from women (e.g., fertilization, 40 weeks of gestation, placentation, and potentially lactation and nursing) than from men (e.g., contribution of sperm). Not only do women report that casual, low-investment sex is less desirable than do men, but women also report that they engage in short-term mating relationships less often than do men (Buss & Schmitt, 1993; Haselton & Buss, 2000; Schmitt, 2005; Schmitt et al., 2003).

In contrast, men and women place similarly great importance in securing a committed long-term bond with a reliable and nurturant mate. This is likely because bonded long-term mates tend to provide substantial investments in their partners and offspring, thereby greatly enhancing reproductive fitness for both partners (Geary, 2000; Kaplan et al., 2000; Ko et al., 2020).

3.2 Relationship Status

As discussed, for individuals not in committed long-term relationships, short-term mating has different implications for men than for women.

For those in committed relationships, however, the benefits of short-term mating tend to be relatively low for most women and men, partially because the cost of losing a high-investment committed partner exceeds the potential benefit of having multiple low-investment sexual partners—even for men (Conroy-Beam et al., 2015). Indeed, once people form long-term relationships, they generally allocate their resources away from seeking new mating partners and toward maintaining their existing relationship (Neel et al., 2016).

4 Overview of the Current Research

Across four studies, we tested the general hypothesis that active mating goals are likely to shape the extent to which life satisfaction is calibrated to mate value, but in specific functional ways (Fig. 1). Study 1 tested our basic predictions that features closely tied to long-
versus short-term mating goals, such as sex and relationship status, predict the association between mate value and life satisfaction. Specifically, we hypothesized that self-perceived mate value as a long-term, committed partner is positively associated with life satisfaction for both men and women regardless of their current relationship status (Hypothesis 1), whereas self-perceived mate value as a short-term, casual-sex partner is positively associated with life satisfaction of men, especially those not in committed relationships (Hypothesis 2). Studies 2 A and 2B were designed to test a variant of Hypothesis 2—that individual differences in mating motivation directly shape the observed sex- and relationship-specific links between self-perceived mate value and life satisfaction. Specifically, we predicted that for those highly motivated toward short-term mating, self-perceived short-term mate value is positively associated with life satisfaction (Hypothesis 3). To test the causal link between mating goal and the significance of mate value for life satisfaction, Study 3 experimentally manipulated short-term mating motivation. If the specific patterns hypothesized of uncommitted men are due primarily to sex differences in short-term mating motivation, then uncommitted (but not committed) women who are experimentally motivated toward short-term mating should exhibit a pattern more similar to uncommitted men—a stronger positive association between self-perceived short-term mate value and life satisfaction (Hypothesis 4). Finally, we conducted internal meta-analyses of our findings. The methods and measures for all four studies were approved by the Institutional Review Board (IRB). In conducting all four studies, we complied with APA ethical standards in the treatment of our participants and received informed consent from them.
5 Study 1

In Study 1, we examined whether people distinguish their mate value as long-term versus short-term mating partners, the extent to which life satisfaction is differentially linked to long- versus short-term self-perceived mate value, and whether such differentiation is predicted by people’s sex and relationship status, as demographic proxies for specific mating goals.

5.1 Method

5.1.1 Participants

Our hypotheses manifest as a three-way interaction. Conservatively estimating a small effect size ($f^2=0.02$) for a three-way interaction, we computed an a priori required sample size of 725 participants using a two-tailed test, $\alpha=0.05$, and power=0.80. We were able to collect data from three-quarters of the undergraduate participants in an introductory psychology subject pool from a large southwestern university in the U.S. as part of an omnibus pre-screen survey administered at the beginning of the semester for course credit. We analyzed data from 385 women ($M=19.1$ years, $SD=1.34$) and 436 men ($M=19.5$ years, $SD=1.80$) who self-reported as heterosexual\(^1\) and completed the measures designed for the current study.

5.1.2 Materials and Procedure

Following prior research, we assessed two forms of self-perceived mate value by asking participants “Compared with other women [men] you know who are about your age, how desirable do men [women] find you as a long-term mate or marriage partner [a short-term mate or casual sex partner]?” (1=Not at all desirable, 9=Extremely desirable; Haselton, 2003). The order of the two questions was counter-balanced.

To assess life satisfaction, we employed the Satisfaction With Life Scale (Diener et al., 1985), comprising five items asking respondents to rate their global life satisfaction from their subjective perspective (e.g., “I am satisfied with my life”; 1=Strongly disagree, 7=Strongly agree; $\alpha=0.94$).

Relationship commitment was assessed via participants’ current relationship status. Participants in a relationship with one person exclusively, or who were engaged or married, were classified as being in a committed relationship ($n=275$); those who were single or in an open relationship were classified as being in an uncommitted relationship ($n=546$).

5.2 Results

Throughout, we contrast coded sex (-0.5 for woman, 0.5 for man) and relationship status (-0.5 for uncommitted, 0.5 for committed), centered mate values and life satisfaction (Cohen et al., 2003), and reported standardized coefficients ($\beta$) from linear regression models.

\(^1\) Across studies, we excluded non-heterosexual individuals prior to analyses; given our focus on differing benefits and costs of short- versus long-term relationships for male and female mating outcomes, we did not have specific a priori hypotheses for non-heterosexual individuals.
First, consistent with the underlying assumption that people differentiate their long-term and short-term mate value, there was only a small correlation between self-perceived long-term mate value and self-perceived short-term mate value, $r = .12, p < .001$.

Second, self-perceived long-term mate value was positively related to life satisfaction, $r = .27, p < .001$. Consistent with Hypothesis 1, men and women who believe they are highly desirable as long-term mating partners reported higher life satisfaction regardless of their current relationship status (Table 1; Fig. 2A).

Third, consistent with Hypothesis 2, we observed a significant Sex $\times$ Relationship Status $\times$ Short-term Mate Value three-way interaction on life satisfaction, $\beta = -0.31$, 95% CI [-0.59, -0.03], $t(813) = -2.14, p = .032$, $R^2 = 0.06$ (Fig. 2B). For uncommitted participants, there was the predicted significant Sex $\times$ Short-term Mate Value two-way interaction, $\beta = 0.35$, 95% CI [0.18, 0.51], $t(542) = 4.00, p < .001$, such that beliefs about one’s desirability as a short-term
mating partner was positively associated with life satisfaction for uncommitted men but not for uncommitted women. For committed participants, however, this two-way interaction was nonsignificant, $\beta = 0.04$, $t(271) = 0.32$, $p = .75$. Once committed to their relationships, short-term mate value was associated with life satisfaction for neither committed men nor committed women (Table 1).

Note Lines denote predicted values and shades denote 95% confidence intervals (CIs) extracted from the full model.

5.3 Discussion

As evidenced by the small correlation between self-perceived long- and short-term mate value, and the differential utility of each for predicting life satisfaction, it seems clear that people view their long-term mate value and short-term mate value as at least somewhat distinct features.

More focally, this study provides preliminary support for our hypotheses. First, consistent with Hypothesis 1, people who believe themselves to be highly desirable as long-term mating partners were more satisfied with their lives, regardless of their sex and current relationship status. In contrast, and consistent with Hypothesis 2, short-term mate value predicted life satisfaction for single uncommitted men only. These findings comport with known sex and relationship differences in mating strategies (Buss & Schmitt, 1993; Schmitt, 2005; Schmitt et al., 2003), and are consistent with the broader idea that self-perceived mate value is likely to be systematically linked to life satisfaction only to the extent it is relevant to achieving sex- and relationship-specific mating goals.

6 Studies 2 A & 2B

Our approach postulates that self-perceived short-term mate value is positively associated with life satisfaction specifically for those for whom short-term mating is a desirable strategy—typically uncommitted men. Studies 2 A and 2B were designed to test a variant of Hypothesis 2—that short-term mating motivation moderates the significance of self-perceived mate value for life satisfaction (Hypothesis 3). Here, we extended beyond demographic proxies for mating motivations (i.e., sex and relationship status) by directly assessing individual differences in short-term mating motivation.
Studies 2 A and 2B had three additional aims. First, given that participants in Study 1 were all college students, we attempted to replicate the previous findings with more general samples that include a broader age range. Second, we attempted to manipulate self-perceived short-term mate value to investigate the causal relationship between self-perceived short-term mate value and life satisfaction. Unable to find manipulations in the literature specifically designed to alter self-perceived short-term mate value, we modified methods designed to manipulate self-perceived ‘general’ mate value. Last, we examined the robustness of our findings to rule out alternative explanations.

Because these two studies are both designed for the same purposes, and differ only in how we attempted to manipulate participant’s self-perceived mate value, we reported these studies together as Studies 2 A and 2B.

6.1 Method

6.1.1 Participants

We sought at least 150 participants per cell in a Sex $\times$ Relationship Status design. We collected data from Amazon’s Mechanical Turk and analyzed the data from 290 women ($M=36.2$ years, $SD=11.4$) and 383 men ($M=34.3$ years, $SD=10.6$) for Study 2A and 255 women ($M=35.8$ years, $SD=10.2$) and 329 men ($M=33.6$ years, $SD=9.4$) for Study 2B who self-reported as heterosexual and passed an attention check.

6.2 Procedure and Materials

6.2.1 Pre-Manipulation Measure

To measure individual differences on short-term mating motivation, we asked participants to indicate agreement with the statement: “I am currently motivated to have a short-term (e.g., brief affair) or casual-sex relationship” ($1=\text{Strongly disagree}$ to $7=\text{Strongly agree}$; Hill et al., 2012).

6.2.2 Study 2A Manipulation by Implicit Social Comparison

Based on the hypothesis that implicit social comparison would alter people’s assessment of their own mate value (Gutierres et al., 1999; Kenrick et al., 1994), and that physical attractiveness is closely tied to short-term mate value for both men and women (Li & Kenrick, 2006), participants rated sexual desirability of photographs of (ostensibly) same-sex local users of a popular dating app widely known for facilitating short-term mating. Participants randomly assigned to the high mate value condition ($n=340$) rated the sexual desirability of 16 low-desirable, 2 average-desirable, and 2 high-desirable same-sex photographs; participants assigned to the low mate value condition ($n=333$) rated the sexual desirability of 16 high-desirable, 2 average-desirable, and 2 low-desirable same-sex photographs ($1=\text{Not at all sexually undesirable}$, $9=\text{Extremely sexually desirable}$). We mixed in a few average- and high-desirability photographs into the high mate-value condition, and a few average- and low-desirability photographs into the low mate-value condition, to make the manipulation less blatant and, thereby, more realistic.
6.2.3 Study 2B Manipulation by Direct Feedback

We employed and modified a method from previous research designed to manipulate self-perceived general mate value (Bailey et al., 2011; Bird et al., 2016; Surbey & Brice, 2007). Within the context of ostensibly revising a fictitious personality inventory, participants completed a wide range of survey questions. We assessed physical appearance (e.g., height, weight, body sizes, self-perceived physical attractiveness, etc.), the Big-Five personality traits (Extraversion, Agreeableness, Conscientiousness, Emotional Stability, Openness to Experiences from the Ten Item Personality Measure; Gosling et al., 2003), and short-term mating motivation. Participants were told that, as part of their compensation for the study, they would be provided with their personal social profile scores and their standing on different dimensions, relative to 10,000 previous respondents in the United States. This feedback enabled the manipulation of short-term mate value.

Ostensibly based on their responses, we provided participants with direct feedback about their short-term mate value while holding constant their beliefs about their value as friends, siblings, coworkers, and long-term committed/romantic partners. In the high mate value condition (n = 291), participants were told that they compared favorably as a short-term sexual partner—that they scored much higher than the population average (top 20%) and higher than their scores in other relationship domains. In the low mate value condition (n = 293), participants were told that the compared less favorably as a short-term sexual partner—that they scored lower than the population average (bottom 45%) and lower than their scores in other relationship domains.

6.2.4 Post-Manipulation Measures

As in Study 1, we assessed self-perceived mate values and life satisfaction ($\alpha_{2A} = .92$, $\alpha_{2B} = .91$). To assess robustness of effects in the face of alternative constructs, participants reported in Study 2A their self-perceived desirability as a friend, sibling, or coworker to members of the opposite sex, compared to same-sex peers (e.g., “Compared with other men [women] you know who are about your age, how desirable do women [men] find you as a friend?”) and in Study 2B their self-esteem (e.g., “I take a positive attitude toward myself”; two items from Rosenberg, 1965; $\alpha = .85$). Last, for exploratory purposes, participants completed the three items of the behavior facet subscale of the Sociosexual Orientation Inventory (e.g., “How many different partners do you foresee yourself having sex with during the next five years?”; Simpson & Gangestad, 1991; $\alpha_{2A} = .68$, $\alpha_{2B} = .72$).

6.3 Results

6.3.1 Manipulation Check

In Study 2A, participants rated high-desirable photographs ($M = 7.26$, $SD = 1.45$) as significantly more sexually desirable than average-desirable ($M = 5.74$, $SD = 1.53$, $t(672) = 32.33$, $p < .001$) and low-desirable ($M = 4.03$, $SD = 1.35$, $t(672) = 50.94$, $p < .001$) photographs, and

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2 If we estimate how the reliability of a measure would change if more items were added to the measure using the Spearman-Brown method, it is expected to have an alpha of 0.97 with a full 10 items, instead of 0.85 with two items
rated average-desirable photographs as significantly more sexually desirable than low-desirable photographs (t(672) = -32.50, p < .001).

However, our attempts to manipulate participants’ beliefs about their short-term mate value were unsuccessful in both Study 2A (M_{high} = 5.15, SD = 2.27, M_{low} = 5.10, SD = 2.42, t(671) = 0.26, p = .79) and in Study 2B (M_{high} = 4.95, SD = 2.38, M_{low} = 4.89, SD = 2.30, t(581) = 0.34, p = .74). These non-differences characterized both male and female participants, and those in both uncommitted and committed relationships (ps > 0.34). We thus collapsed across experimental conditions and assessed whether the correlational findings here replicated those from Study 1. We return to the manipulation failure in the General Discussion.

### 6.3.2 Replication of Study 1

Consistent with Study 1, the associations between self-perceived long-term and short-term mate value were of small to moderate magnitude (2A: r = .33; 2B: r = .12); self-perceived long-term mate value was positively related to life satisfaction across participant sex and relationship status (2A: r = .33, p < .001; 2B: r = .51, p < .001; Table 1); and the Sex × Relationship Status × Short-term Mate Value three-way interaction on life satisfaction obtained (2A: β = -.04, 95% CI [-0.67, -0.01], t(664) = -2.71, p = .007, R^2 = .09; 2B: β = -.034, 95% CI [-0.67, -0.01], t(575) = -2.02, p = .043, R^2 = .17; Figures 3A and 3A). The Sex × Short-term Mate Value two-way interaction was significant for uncommitted participants (2A: β = 0.47, 95% CI [0.24, 0.69], t(310) = 4.08, p < .001; 2B: β = 0.31, 95% CI [0.02, 0.60], t(209) = 2.11, p = .036), but nonsignificant for committed participants (2A: β = 0.06, t(354) = 0.57, p = .57; 2B: β = -0.03, t(366) = -0.30, p = .77; Table 1). These findings support both Hypotheses 1 and 2.

### 6.3.3 Moderation by Short-term Mating Motivation

First, an ANOVA revealed a main effect of relationship status on short-term mating motivation, with uncommitted participants reporting more short-term mating motivation than committed participants (2A: F(1, 669) = 72.12, p < .001; 2B: F(1, 579) = 39.42, p < .001), and a main effect of sex, with men reporting more short-term mating motivation than women (2A: F(1, 669) = 114.59, p < .001; 2B: F(1, 579) = 72.93, p < .001). These effects were qualified, however, by the predicted Sex × Relationship Status interaction (2A: F(1, 669) = 7.27, p = .007, R^2 = 0.22; 2B: F(1, 579) = 8.72, p = .003, R^2 = 0.17; Figs. 3B and 4B). Men in uncommitted relationships were especially likely to be motivated toward short-term mating, likely explaining why their self-perceived short-term mate value was positively related to their life satisfaction in Study 1.

Second, a linear regression revealed the predicted Short-term Mating Motivation × Short-term Mate Value two-way interaction on life satisfaction, conceptually replicating the sex- and relationship-specific links between short-term mate value and life satisfaction (2A: β = 0.16, 95% CI [0.05, 0.28], t(668) = 2.70, p = .007. R^2 = 0.02; 2B: β = 0.15, 95% CI [0.03, 0.27], t(579) = 2.46, p = .014. R^2 = 0.03). Probing the interaction at one standard deviation above and below the mean of short-term mating motivation (Aiken & West, 1991), we see that, for those high in short-term mating motivation, self-perceived short-term mate value was strongly and positively related to their life satisfaction (2A: β = 0.33, 95% CI [0.14,
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0.52], \( t(668) = 3.41, p < .001 \); 2B: \( \beta = 0.36, 95\% \text{ CI} \ [0.17, 0.54], t(579) = 3.37, p = .002 \); this was not the case for those low in short-term mating motivation (2 A: \( \beta = -0.11, t(668) = -1.28, p = .20 \); 2B: \( \beta = -0.03, t(579) = -0.31, p = .76 \); Figs. 3 and 4 C). Consistent with Hypothesis 3, these findings demonstrate that individual differences in short-term mating motivation can moderate the link between self-perceived short-term mate value and life satisfaction, illustrating the functional specificity of these relations: Short-term mate value only serves as a useful cue for life satisfaction for those motivated toward short-term mating.

### 6.3.4 Robustness Checks

In Study 2 A, after controlling for participant self-evaluations as a friend, sibling, and coworker, self-perceived long-term mate value continued to be positively associated with
life satisfaction ($\beta=0.31$, 95% CI [0.23, 0.38], $t(666)=7.95$, $p<.001$), and self-perceived short-term mate value continued to be positively associated with life satisfaction for uncommitted men ($\beta=0.31$, 95% CI [0.19, 0.45], $t(199)=4.81$, $p<.001$).

Consistent with previous research, we found in Study 2B that life satisfaction and self-esteem were highly correlated, $r=.78$, $p<.001$. However, above and beyond self-esteem, self-perceived long-term mate value was significantly associated with life satisfaction ($\beta=0.16$, 95% CI [0.10, 0.22], $t(580)=5.40$, $p<.001$), and self-perceived short-term mate value was significantly associated with life satisfaction for uncommitted men ($\beta=0.18$, 95% CI [0.06, 0.31], $t(142)=2.93$, $p=.004$).

Thus, self-perceived mate value carried useful predictive information above and beyond that of both one’s self-perceived value as a partner for other types of social relationships.
and general self-esteem. These results rule out an alternative explanation in which a general inclination toward maintaining a positive self-view leads both to enhanced self-perceived mate value and life satisfaction.

Consistent with previous research, we found in Study 2B that life satisfaction and the Big-Five personality traits were significantly correlated (Neuroticism $r=-.35$, $p<.001$; Extroversion $r=.30$, $p<.001$; Conscientiousness $r=.26$, $p<.001$; Agreeableness $r=.25$, $p<.001$; Openness $r=.17$, $p<.001$). However, revealing again the robustness of the reported effects, above and beyond all Big-Five personality traits, self-perceived long-term mate value was significantly related to life satisfaction ($\beta=0.41$, 95% CI [0.34, 0.49], $t(576)=11.28$, $p<.001$), and self-perceived short-term mate value was significantly related to life satisfaction for uncommitted men ($\beta=0.33$, 95% CI [0.16, 0.50], $t(138)=3.86$, $p=.001$).

6.4 Discussion

The findings of Studies 2 A and 2B closely replicated the findings of Study 1 and demonstrated that individual differences in short-term mating motivation moderate the link between self-perceived short-term mate value and life satisfaction. Additionally, these findings were demonstrated to be robust against other forms of self-evaluation and Big Five personality traits. In all, Studies 2 A and 2B provide consistent and converging evidence that life satisfaction is systematically calibrated to long-term and short-term mate values in functionally cogent ways.

These studies, however, failed to assess the causal relationship between self-perceived short-term mate value and life satisfaction, as participants’ beliefs about their short-term mate value were uninfluenced by our experimental manipulations; in the General Discussion, we address the possibility that self-perceived mate value may be relatively stable over short periods of time.

7 Study 3

In Studies 2 A and 2B, sex differences in the association between self-perceived short-term mate value and life satisfaction were predicted by sex differences in short-term mating motivation. To examine the causal effect of mating goal on the relevance of mate value for life satisfaction, we attempted to experimentally manipulate women’s short-term mating motivation to be similar to that of men. We hypothesized that uncommitted (but not committed) women exposed to a situation designed to engage short-term mating motivation would exhibit a pattern more similar to uncommitted men—a stronger positive association between self-perceived short-term mate value and life satisfaction (Hypothesis 4).

7.1 Method

7.1.1 Participants

Based on the weighted mean effect size for three-way interactions across previous studies, we computed an $a priori$ required sample size of 151 participants using a two-tailed test, $f^2=0.10$, $\alpha=0.05$, and power=0.80. We collected data from an introductory psychology
subject pool at a large southwestern university in the United States and analyzed data from 157 women ($M=19.0$ years, $SD=1.06$) who self-reported being heterosexual and passed an attention check.

### 7.1.2 Materials and Procedure

Employing a procedure slightly modified from one successfully used in previous research (Ainsworth & Maner, 2012; Maner et al., 2007), participants randomly assigned to the short-term mating condition ($n=75$) listed five instances in which they felt sexual desire or arousal “from afar—that is, without having interacted with the person yet,” and then visualized in detail for approximately 5 min an experience involving intense sexual desire. The instruction was written to focus participants away from thinking about long-term mating instances and toward short-term mating instances. Participants assigned to the control condition ($n=82$) instead listed and visualized instances in which they felt loved and cared for by a family member.

Participants then completed the same measures of self-perceived mate value and life satisfaction as in previous studies.

### 7.2 Results

Six independent coders rated how much the women participants would feel sexually aroused, romantically aroused, and loved and cared for in the situation they described in their responses ($1=\text{Not at all}; 7=\text{Extremely}$). Raters predicted that women in the mating condition were more likely to feel sexually aroused ($M_{\text{mating}}=4.28$, $SD=1.49$; $M_{\text{control}}=1.05$, $SD=0.25$; $t(155)=19.34, p<.001$) and romantically aroused ($M_{\text{mating}}=3.78$, $SD=1.22$; $M_{\text{control}}=1.95$, $SD=0.45$; $t(155)=12.69, p<.001$) than women in the control condition, whereas they predicted that women in the control condition were more likely to feel loved and cared for ($M_{\text{mating}}=3.17$, $SD=1.06$; $M_{\text{control}}=5.17$, $SD=0.91$; $t(155)=-12.76, p<.001$) than women in the mating condition. The intraclass correlation coefficients between the 6 raters indicated good to excellent reliabilities on the ratings (0.96 for sexually aroused, 0.86 for romantically aroused, 0.91 for loved and cared for).

A linear regression on Manipulated Short-term Mating Motivation (contrast coded: -0.5 for control condition, 0.5 for short-term mating condition), Short-term Mate Value, and Relationship Status revealed the hypothesized three-way interaction on life satisfaction, $\beta=-0.70$, 95% CI [-1.32, -0.08], $t(149)=-2.22, p=.028, R^2=0.11$ (Fig. 5).

As expected, self-perceived short-term mate value was unaffected by the mating motivation manipulation, $t(155)=-1.25, p>.21$. For uncommitted women, the predicted Short-term Mating Motivation × Short-term Mate Value interaction emerged, $\beta=0.49$, 95% CI [0.09, 0.90], $t(77)=2.43, p=.017$, $R^2=0.16$. For uncommitted women exposed to the short-term mating motivation manipulation, self-perceived short-term mate value was positively associated with life satisfaction, $\beta=0.58$, 95% CI [0.25, 0.91] $t(32)=3.57, p=.001$, similar to the pattern previously found only for uncommitted men; for uncommitted women in the control condition, however, there was no such relationship, $\beta=0.08$, $t(45)=0.66, p=.51$. In contrast, for women in committed relationships, the Short-term Mating Motivation × Short-term Mate Value interaction was nonsignificant, $\beta=-0.20$, $t(72)=-0.84, p=.40$. Indeed, if anything, there was a margin-
ally significant negative association between short-term mate value and life satisfaction for women exposed to the short-term mating manipulation, $\beta = -0.31$, $t(39) = -1.94$, $p = .06$, such that committed women who believed themselves to be low in short-term mate value tended to be highly satisfied with their lives; there was no significant association between self-perceived short-term mate value and life satisfaction for committed women in the control condition, $\beta = -0.10$, $t(33) = -0.57$, $p = .57$.

### 7.3 Discussion

Study 3 provides corroborating experimental evidence: Consistent with Hypothesis 4, encountering a manipulation designed to engage short-term mating motivation can cause women in uncommitted relationships—who by default tend to be relatively low in short-term mating motivation—to psychologically operate somewhat like uncommitted men, in that their self-perceived short-term mate value was positively associated with their life satisfaction. These findings support a functional conceptualization of life satisfaction, showing that currently active mating goals can shape the extent to which goal-specific self-perceived mate value predicts life satisfaction.

### 8 Meta-Analyses of the Findings from Studies 1–3

To assess the reliability of findings across Studies 1–3 (total $n=2,235$), we performed random effect meta-analyses on the standardized coefficients. Based on guidelines from Funder & Ozer (2019), the meta-analyses revealed a large effect size for the association between self-perceived long-term mate value and life satisfaction for men and women regardless of relationship status (overall $r = .35$, 95% CI [0.31, 0.38]), supporting Hypothesis 1, and a large effect size for the association between self-perceived short-term mate value on life satisfaction for those with short-term mating motivation—single uncommitted men (Studies...
1, 2 A, and 2B) and single uncommitted women whose short-term mating motivation was experimentally engaged (Study 3) (overall $r = .33$, 95% CI [0.26, 0.39]), supporting Hypothesis 2. Especially significant, we observed a moderate effect of Sex × Relationship Status × Short-term Mate Value three-way interaction on life satisfaction, $\beta = -0.37$, 95% CI [-0.54, −0.21]; $z = -4.38$, $p < .001$; heterogeneity $Q(3) = 1.37$, $p = .71$; $R^2 = 0.08$. The other focal analyses were also significant across multiple replications (Table 2).

### 9 General Discussion

People frequently audit their life satisfaction and view it as very important (Diener, 2000), yet little research has attended to its function—instead taking for granted that people want to be satisfied with their lives. But why should this be? Here, we have investigated the idea that life satisfaction partially functions as a subjective indicator of potential goal achievement. If life satisfaction is a subjective indicator of potential goal achievement, active and fundamentally important goals should shape the extent to which life satisfaction is calibrated to cues linked to likely success on these goals. We focused on mating goals because they are of fundamental concern to nearly all people at some point in their lives and because differences in motivation for different mating strategies enable nuanced hypotheses not readily derived by other conceptual approaches. Because mate value takes different forms depending on whether one is adopting long-term versus short-term strategies, and because these different strategies tend to be differentially relevant to men and women and to people in uncommitted versus committed relationships, the implications of mate value for life satisfaction are likely to be nuanced in sex- and relationship-specific functional ways.

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4 In Study 3, we experimentally manipulated short-term mating motivation, assessing the hypothesis that the predicted positive association between self-perceived short-term mate value and life satisfaction would appear for uncommitted women for whom short-term mating motivation was experimentally manipulated—just as it does for uncommitted men under default circumstances. To make the analysis in Study 3 comparable to those in Studies 1 and 2 for this meta-analysis, we coded Study 3 women in the short-term mating condition as we did male participants in Studies 1 and 2, and the Study 3 women in the control condition as we did women participants in Studies 1 and 2. Note that replicating the meta-analyses excluding Study 3 does not alter assessments of statistical significance or the conclusions, three-way interaction $\beta = -0.35$, 95% CI [-0.52, −0.18].

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| Table 2 | Meta-analytic Effects Across Studies 1–3 | Standardized coefficient | 95% confidence interval | $R^2$ |
|---------|------------------------------------------|-------------------------|-------------------------|------|
| Life satisfaction predicted by Long-term mate value | 0.35*** | [0.21, 0.49] | 0.12 |
| Life satisfaction predicted by Short-term mate value × Sex × Relationship status | -0.37*** | [-0.54, −0.21] | 0.08 |
| Short-term mating motivation predicted by Sex × Relationship status | -0.43** | [-0.64, −0.22] | 0.20 |
| Life satisfaction predicted by Short-term mate value × Short-term mating motivation | 0.11** | [0.05, 0.16] | 0.02 |

* $p<.05$, ** $p<.01$, *** $p<.001$
Across four studies, we found consistent, theoretically coherent patterns of results revealing that both chronically active and experimentally activated mating goals predict the association between self-perceived mate value and life satisfaction. Whereas higher self-perceived long-term mate value was positively associated with greater life satisfaction for both men and women regardless of current relationship status (Studies 1, 2A, and 2B; Hypothesis 1), higher self-perceived short-term mate value was positively associated with greater life satisfaction only for those motivated towards short-term relationships—single uncommitted men (Studies 1, 2A, and 2B; Hypothesis 2), individuals dispositionally motivated towards short-term mating relationships (Studies 2A and 2B; Hypothesis 3), and single uncommitted women whose short-term mating motivation was experimentally heightened (Study 3; Hypothesis 4). Internal meta-analyses across the four studies revealed the above findings to be reliable and robust.

A novel contribution of our research is that we proposed and explored a functional approach toward life satisfaction within a domain of fundamental concern for most everyone at some point in their life. We found support that life satisfaction may partially function as a subjective indicator of potential mating goal achievement: It was sensitively and selectively predicted by the specific form of self-perceived mate value concordant with participants’ currently engaged mating goal.

9.1 Alternative Explanations

Study 3’s experimental manipulation of women’s short-term mating motivation directly demonstrated that engagement of short-term mating motivation causes a significantly stronger association between self-perceived short-term mate value and life satisfaction for the uncommitted women. Given the experimental failures of Studies 2, however, we were not able to assess the causal relationship between self-perceived mate value and life satisfaction. Although we believe the functional logic articulated makes it likely that self-perceived mate value causes life satisfaction, one could hypothesize a reverse causal pathway, such that greater life satisfaction enhances self-views of mate value because such satisfied individuals are also more optimistic about their potential success on mating (Lucas et al., 1996; Schimmack et al., 2004). Alternatively, one might hypothesize that people with a general inclination to view themselves favorably may possess both an enhanced self-view of mate value and a belief that one’s life is generally of high quality—thereby generating a positive correlation between self-perceived mate value and life satisfaction.

Although apparently reasonable on their faces, such alternatives cannot logically account for the pattern of findings presented—(1) for the relatively low correlations between long- and short-term mate value, (2) for differences in how long- and short-term mate value predicted life satisfaction, (3) for the lack of positive association between short-term mate value and life satisfaction for men in committed relationships, (4) for the lack of positive association between short-term mate value and life satisfaction for women (except for uncommitted women exposed to our manipulation of short-term mating motivation in Study 3), or (5) for the robustness of the link between mate value and life satisfaction against other self-evaluations. The specificity of the observed effects cannot be readily derived from conceptualizations focused on positive illusion biases caused by life satisfaction or from general self-enhancement.
One might argue that the weak association between women’s short-term mate value and life satisfaction results from women’s generally negative responses to sexual valuation (Calogero, 2004; Fairchild & Rudman, 2008). However, women’s own beliefs about their short-term mate value were not negatively associated with their life satisfaction. Moreover, for uncommitted women exposed to our manipulation of short-term mating motivation, short-term mate value positively predicted life satisfaction. Such results are in line with findings that being sexually valued by a committed mating partner is positively linked to women’s relationship satisfaction (Meltzer, 2020; Meltzer et al., 2017).

9.2 Implications and Future Directions

9.2.1 Function of Life Satisfaction

The current work contributes to research on the adaptive functionality of inner experiential states by offering a useful framework for conceptualizing life satisfaction. Our findings support a novel hypothesis that life satisfaction serves as part of an internal psychological system that monitors individuals’ success or failure in managing important social challenges. Consistent with this, life satisfaction was predicted by cues implying success or failure toward the relevant goals (e.g., short-term mate value) only to the extent those goals were dispositionally important and/or acutely engaged (e.g., for those interested in short-term relationships).

Longitudinal studies suggest that life satisfaction is prospectively associated with and precedes desirable characteristics, resources, and adaptive behaviors (Lyubomirsky et al., 2005). Future research might profitably explore the full functional process by investigating how life satisfaction, calibrated to cues related to potential success in desired goal pursuit, causes downstream goal-enhancing behaviors.

9.2.2 Individual Differences in Determinants of Life Satisfaction

People vary greatly in their life satisfaction. Our approach suggests novel contributors to these differences. The specificity of our findings—that different forms of mate value predicted life satisfaction differently for different individuals (based on sex, current relationship status, current mating strategy)—suggests that a range of individual differences contribute importantly to differences in life satisfaction.

First, differences in goal priorities are likely to contribute to differences in life satisfaction. Because different cues are useful for assessing likely success for different goals, and because people differ in which goals they prioritize, one would expect life satisfaction to be selectively calibrated to different goal-specific cues for different people. To better predict life satisfaction, one should consider individual differences in goal priority and likely success in those prioritized goals.

Second, individuals might differ in life satisfaction because, even when life satisfaction is shaped by a similar goal pursuit, there may be substantial differences in how life satisfaction is calibrated, given the relevance of different features as cues to goal success for different individuals. For example, because different features shape mate value for men and women (Li et al., 2002), life satisfaction of men and women may track different features (Ko & Suh, 2019).
Last, one’s ecology and culture might influence which fundamental goals are chronically active and which indicators represent goal achievement, thereby influencing life satisfaction. For instance, mating strategies and mate qualities are shaped differently by ecology and culture (Marlowe, 2004; Pillsworth, 2008). Women in areas of high income inequality are more likely to post sexualized photographs of themselves on social media, perhaps because they encounter greater mating competition (Blake et al., 2018). One might thus expect that, for women who live in environments where the incentive for sexualization is high, self-perceived short-term mate value might especially contribute to their life satisfaction. Future research might profitably investigate how life satisfaction is calibrated by different valuations and criteria for mating partners across different ecologies and cultures.

### 9.2.3 Gender Equality and Culture on Mating Goal

In Studies 1, 2A, and 2B, we showed that one’s mating goal is partially shaped by sex and relationship status, interactively. Sex differences only emerged in the short-term mating domain and for those in uncommitted relationships, but not in the long-term mating domain and for those in committed relationships. Emphasizing the role of motivation above and beyond one’s biological sex, single uncommitted women whose short-term mating motivation was experimentally heightened showed the same pattern as single uncommitted men (Study 3).

On the one hand, given that short-term mating motivation was flexibly shifted by situational activation (Study 3), it seems likely that mating goals are shaped by culture and norms. Indeed, there has been a significant cultural change toward the loosening of sexual norms, including the shift to casual sex (Garcia et al., 2012), concurrent with changes in gender roles and increases in gender equality around the world (Varnum & Grossmann, 2017). On the other hand, women (but not men) who engage in casual sex still tend to be viewed negatively by others (Krems et al., 2021; Sagebin Bordini & Sperb, 2013). Moreover, given that gender-associated differences are stronger in countries with greater economic development and gender equality (Falk & Hermle, 2018), and that the world is generally becoming more economically developed and gender equal, one might expect even greater differences in short-term mating motivation in recent decades than before. Future research might profitably investigate the implication of the increase in gender equality and cultural changes in sexuality on mating goals and mating motivations.

### 9.2.4 Nuanced Conceptions of Self-Perceived Mate Value

The current study highlights the usefulness of differentiating between long-term and short-term mate value. Not only were self-perceived long-and short-term mate value only modestly correlated, but they differentially predicted life satisfaction for different individuals, and when different mating goals were engaged. Future work may benefit from examining how people assess their long- vs. short-term mate value given that different factors are desired for long- vs. short-term mating relationships (Li & Kenrick, 2006), and whether distinctive forms of self-perceived mate value have unique implications for other important psychological variables.

Our findings further suggest that people may have relatively stable beliefs about their mate value. Although we attempted to shift personal beliefs about short-term mating desir-
ability via implicit social comparison and direct feedback, we were unsuccessful; for adults who have been mating-motivated for some time, self-perceived mate value may be stable in the short-term (Edlund & Sagarin, 2014). Specifically, because both men and women highly prioritize physical attractiveness for short-term mating relationships while also believing it difficult to intentionally control or alter physical attractiveness in the absence of great effort (Ben Hamida et al., 1998), experimentally manipulating self-perceived short-term mate value may be quite difficult. Future research may profitably investigate factors that shape mate value stability and change.

10 Conclusion

Life satisfaction may partially function to index potential success on fundamentally adaptive, active goals and to motivate action toward those goals, thereby promoting individuals’ success. Four studies demonstrated that when people believe they possess characteristics predictive of success on active important goals, they are more likely to be satisfied with their lives. Building on a growing body of literature examining the functional significance of subjective states, this framework highlights a novel way of conceptualizing life satisfaction. This functional approach to understanding life satisfaction may help synthesize the existing literature and generate novel predictions, thereby advancing the field toward a richer understanding of subjective human well-being.

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Declarations

Conflict of interest The authors declare they have no conflicts of interest with respect to this work.

Compliance of ethical standard statement In the conduct of these studies, we complied with APA ethical standards in the treatment of our samples. This research received approval from the Institutional Review Board of the Arizona State University.

Informed Consent We received informed consent from all individuals participating in the present research.

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