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This is Psychological Frontiers: Exploring Human Behavior. I’m Dawn Albertson.

Lead:
Unhappy with your husband? His genes could be to blame.

Content:
What’s currently known about the biological basis of monogamy is owed to the surprising contributions of the prairie vole. This rodent is relatively unique amongst mammals because they form life-long monogamous relationships with both social and sexual fidelity. Through painstaking study of vole biology, the source of their monogamy has been found in their neurochemistry – specifically, within the workings of a neurotransmitter called vasopressin.

Recently, a fascinating study was conducted to see what, if any, influence the vasopressin system had in human relationships. Hasse Walum of the Karolinska Institute surveyed and took genetic information from 552 Swedish couples who had been in monogamous relationships for at least five years. Similar to what is seen in prairie voles, only men were affected by which version of the gene they possessed. One version in particular was implicated in a variety of relationship quality measures. Specifically, men with this version of the gene were significantly less likely to be married than men without it, despite all having been in a committed relationship for over five years. Also, a lower level of bonding was seen between romantic partners if the man possessed this gene. In fact, these men were significantly more likely to have experienced marital crisis or the threat of divorce in the last year than men without it. Finally, when asking the female partners about the quality of their relationship the researchers discovered that women rated their relationship as lower in the expression of affection and overall pair cohesion if they were involved with men who have this version of the gene.

The idea that this version of the gene is detrimental to the ability to interact within a relationship is supported by another research study showing it to be associated with autism, a condition characterized by impairments of social relating. Though more research needs to be done, the apparent biological influence on our social behaviors is undeniable.

Psychological Frontiers is produced by the Psychology Department at Minnesota State University, Mankato. I’m Dr. Dawn Albertson.
