

emotional experiences that come with oppression – such as shame or fear. They then acknowledge the possibility of *social resilience* to oppressive narratives for some individuals who are already in marginalised groups.

Women, gay men, or older people who suffer more single stereotyping are already in marginalised groups. We hypothesise that members of already marginalised groups are better equipped to engage in narrative resistance, which in turn can counteract the effects of oppressive narratives on well-being. This happens even if individuals belonging to these groups are under more social scrutiny about their singlehood status and even experiencing higher FOBS.

Our resilience hypothesis has two advantages over the gender divide proposed by the authors in the target article. First, contradictory evidence need not be explained away by more or less generic contextual factors. Indeed, context influences post-dissolution well-being, but the specific contributing factors are a) belonging to marginalised groups, and b) social resilience. Re-interpreting their results through this lens reveals that women do indeed prove more socially resilient than men in general, but not universally, as shown by the contradictory evidence. For that reason, although the divergence in post-romantic-dissolution well-being may show across a binary gender divide, it is not itself dependent on gender. Hence, the importance placed on romantic relationships is not itself dependent on gender either. Second, our approach opens a route for future research that overcomes an unnecessary restriction to binary gender and heterosexuality. If our hypothesis is correct, the gender divide will have lesser or no relevance in comparison studies among queer or racialised people.

Financial support. None.

Competing interests. None.

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Parsimony and basic principles in human “romantic” relationships

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doi:10.1017/S0140525X25102355, e111

Abstract

Compared to women, men seek romantic relationships more, benefit more from said relationships, are less likely to initiate breakups, and suffer more afterwards.

Explanations based on the availability of emotional support are unnecessary. The four patterns can be explained more parsimoniously by sexual selection, which is applicable to all life forms, including humans, and by family law in WEIRD societies.

The paper evokes images of a generic courtroom drama in which the prosecutor asks a witness whether he had a romantic relationship with the defendant. He vehemently denies it. The prosecutor insists: “but you went on vacations together, had weekend getaways, and had overnight visits twice weekly for several months.” The witness agrees. The prosecutor continues: “Yet you testify that you did not have a romantic relationship with

the defendant. Would you care to explain this inconsistency?” The witness replies: “No inconsistency, sir. She often told me, even while in bed, that I was the least romantic man she had ever met.”

From the first line of the paper to the last paragraph, the authors use the term “romantic,” but do not define it. Sometimes it seems the term is being used euphemistically instead of “sex,” but at other times, it seems that authors rely on a more strict definition. In any case, each of the 4 premises about romance can be explained more parsimoniously by the most basic principles of sexual selection and by peculiarities of family law in WEIRD societies (Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich, and Democratic).

Men seek romance more than women do

The desire for sex is a more parsimonious explanation. In all species, not just humans, fitness is maximized in females by increasing the quality of their partners and in males by increasing the quantity of partners. This difference is a basic consequence of anisogamy, which defines the sexes and hence has been around since the two sexes first evolved (Bell, 1982).

Also, the words “sex” and “gender” are not interchangeable. Sex refers to gamete size, and there are only two: large (eggs) and small (sperm). Often there is no functional difference, but sometimes, two or more genders can occur within a sex (Lozano & Ros, 2022).

Men benefit more than women from romantic relationships

Two separate issues are addressed: emotional support and unequal division of labor at home.

Men do have fewer extra-pair friends and confidants, and hence rely on their sexual partners for emotional support. However, maybe men just do not need as much emotional support as women do. Without delving here in the nature/nurture debate, it is well known that men are less emotional than women, both in terms of feeling those emotions and expressing them. Actually, selection can only act upon external manifestations of emotions, their expression (Darwin, 1872).

Subsequently, the authors address household contributions, a discussion that is completely backwards. Actually, men benefit extensively by just cleaning up after themselves, a fact well supported by personal experience, anecdotal accounts, and historical literature. I will leave the first two up to the readers’ individual experiences and discussion with their spouses. More poignantly, ancient writings from a variety of cultures depict women as agents of chaos (Vajskop, 2005). Today, a common reason women have for breakups is that the man was “too controlling.” Finally, the entire discussion about household chores ignores men’s financial contributions; if they become single and manage to keep all their resources, they could easily afford to hire a maid.

Men are less likely than women to initiate breakups

This is clearly true, but more parsimonious explanations exist.

First, for most of our existence, we have lived among small groups of people whom we have known our entire lives. Life was short and women had few choices in partners. Any woman who spent decades seeking the right partner left no descendants.

Our lifespans have increased steadily over the millennia and, due to medicine, sharply over the past 75 years. Our social circles have also increased over the millennia and, due to the internet, sharply over the past 40 years. The actual number of men suitable

for marriage for women might not have changed much, but to women, it seems like they now have thousands of options and decades to choose and change their choices.

Second, married women in WEIRD societies receive financial rewards for leaving a marriage. Upon divorce, men can end up losing half of all their worldly possessions, and are usually required to keep paying their former spouses for many years thereafter, sometimes for life. In essence, Trivers’ “cruel bind” (Trivers, 1972) is not retrospective but rather prospective and applies almost exclusively to men. Laws in WEIRD societies discourage men from leaving a marriage and encourage women to do so.

Third, in WEIRD societies, the provisioning of children is not the sole responsibility of custodial parent. A woman knows that if a man, married or divorced, is unable to provide for his children, society will help. Why should a woman put all her eggs in one basket, one man?

Men suffer more after a breakup

Well, yes, but maybe it is because upon divorce in WEIRD societies, men lose half their wealth to the spouse, lose custody of and sometimes access to their children, and continue supporting their spouse long after the marriage has ended, sometimes for life. For men, prosperity after divorce is a luxury reserved for wealthy men.

Conclusion

The paper paints women as being unromantic, but readers ought not to arrive at that conclusion. Living organisms react and adapt to their environment. WEIRD societies are vastly different from the conditions in which humans evolved. In ancient times, the four premises would have been more applicable to women. Using the strict meaning of the word “romance”, women were more likely to seek actual romance, benefit more from it, be faithful to their romantic partners, and suffer more if the romantic relationship ended.

Much of this discussion hinges on the lack of a distinction by the authors between a “romantic” and a “sexual” relationship. The terms are not interchangeable. Euphemisms are great in love songs, but are perhaps not as useful in formal studies of sexual relationships that include long-term pairings and opportunistic copulations. The first verse of the 1986 song “Lady in Red,” written and performed by Chris de Burgh, explains it very well:

“I’ve never seen so many men ask you if you wanted to dance, looking for a little romance, given half a chance.”

Financial support

This research received no specific grant from any funding agency, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

Competing interests

The author declares none.

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If men benefit more, should women demand more? A commentary on relationship dependence and mate selectivity

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doi:[10.1017/S0140525X25102641](https://doi.org/10.1017/S0140525X25102641), e112

Abstract

Wahring et al. argue that men are more dependent than women on romantic relationships for emotional support and intimacy. We propose a testable implication of this asymmetry: if women benefit less from relationships, they should be choosier about entering them. Evidence from personality and dyadic studies supports this prediction and suggests productive extensions of the authors' framework.

The authors convincingly argue that romantic relationships are more desired by men than by women. A testable implication of their account is that women should be more demanding than men when specifying the minimal characteristics of a satisfactory mate: if men benefit more than women from a relationship, then men would reasonably be quicker than women to accept a mate with fewer desirable features.

Results from existing studies support this possibility. For example, a classic 37-culture study of more than 9,000 individuals found that women were more prone than men to characterize elements of the 18-item list of features of a mate as “indispensable” (Buss et al., 1990). One potential interpretation of this result is that, because females derive less benefit from heterosexual relationships than males do, they may be more inclined to seek aspirational matches – what we refer to as “female pickiness.” An alternative explanation is that females are, on average, simply better romantic partners than are males. Here, females insisting on higher standards than males may reflect instead that, for example, the median female is a better relationship partner than is the median male, and thus that females seeking partners of equal quality will

need to reject a disproportionately high proportion of the male population.

We see both of these possibilities as equally consistent with the target article: Wahring and colleagues compellingly argue that males derive more benefit from romantic relationships than females, but this could plausibly reflect extra-relationship circumstances of males (e.g., fewer close friends), within-relationship dynamics (superior average female performance as a relationship partner), or some combination of the two.

To the best of our knowledge, thorough explorations of the “female superiority” possibility remain to be performed. Existing research suggests that any plausible version of this account is unlikely to be simple. For example, while the elevated average female scores on agreeableness points to them being comparatively desirable as romantic partners relative to men, the elevated female scores on neuroticism point in the opposite direction (Weisberg et al., 2011). Future work might attempt a comprehensive integration across the various characteristics that make one a desirable partner alongside studies of existing gender differences in those characteristics to evaluate how average gender differences across various traits do or do not help to explain the general observations of the target article. Barring this, however, studies of existing couples may be informative: previous research has found that whereas men and women showed similar standards in their relationships, women were better at meeting the man's standards than men were at meeting the woman's (Vangelisti & Daly, 1997). This points to “female superiority” as a live possibility accounting for elevated female standards.

However, “female pickiness” has its own line of support from studies of ideal partner personality. Heterosexual singles of both genders seek partners with superior traits – that is, higher scores in socially desirable directions – relative to their own self-reported personality traits. But a recent four-culture study found this tendency to be roughly twice as pronounced in females as in males (Liu et al., 2018).

One interpretive challenge is that genders plausibly differ in their degree of overstating their own positive qualities. Such differences appear unlikely to be large and are likely nuanced by features of the traits in question (such as their reflection of agentic or communal themes; Paulhus & John, 1998). Nevertheless, men and women engaging in the same degree of aspirational mating with respect to personality will still plausibly differ, due to gender differences in self-enhancement, in the size of the discrepancy between their self-rating and their characterization of their ideal partner's characteristics. Specifically, this discrepancy may appear smaller in men if they are more prone than women to overstate their levels of the characteristics in question.

However, studies whose methods escape this particular concern still point to elevated female pickiness: women have been observed to engage in comparatively more aspirational mating with respect to personality than men even when the participant's own personality is indicated not by self-report but by ratings provided by their partner or by independent observers (Botwin et al., 1997).

In sum, studies of existing couples and of ideal partner preferences suggest that women may impose higher thresholds for partner acceptability due to both of the channels suggested above: females are, on average, plausibly superior relationship partners to males, and the lesser benefits females derive from heterosexual relationships mean females are, beyond their superiority as partners, plausibly pickier than males. This dual-path account aligns with the core claim of the target article: that men are more motivated to enter and maintain romantic relationships. If women