

Original Article

**WORKING TOWARDS A MODEL OF NORMATIVE
BEHAVIOR FOR LONG-TERM COMMITTED
RELATIONSHIPS**

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Abstract

We propose that one area of great importance, which has remained virtually unexamined by evolutionary psychologists, is how individuals maintain their long-term romantic relationships during difficult times. Of those Canadians who marry, the majority remain so until their 30th anniversary, and thus demonstrate the possession of effective techniques for dealing with difficulties and consequently, continuing the relationship. What is interesting is that the field is dominated by studies of issues that represent only small segments of the population (e.g., the behaviour of those who are single or seeking an alternative mate) and often in a specific and unreached stage of a romantic relationship (e.g., mate poaching or dissolution). The danger in the field having such limited focus is that it could lead to a view of committed relationships based on what is “abnormal” as opposed to what is “normal.” We follow our theoretical review with an exploratory study on relationship maintenance, as a first step in the investigation of this overlooked area.

Keywords: evolutionary psychology, interpersonal relationships, sex differences, dyads, romantic relationships

Introduction

The discipline of clinical psychology has a history of studying “abnormal” cases, which are examined to understand not only these patients but also to, by contrast, learn about “normal” behavior. For example, the renowned Lightner Witmer published an article in 1907, calling for a new discipline of “clinical psychology,” within which psychologists would study mentally handicapped children and how “they deviate from the average child” (p.8). As part of this new discipline, psychologists would have to

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determine what the average child was like, at least in terms of their intellectual abilities, and then ascertain how these mentally handicapped children were different.

The obvious problem with observing irregular functioning to learn about regular behavior is that it does not necessarily lead to accurate conclusions. Simply having the absence of a particular symptom does not mean that a person is free of any psychological disorder; it simply means that the individual might not have the disorder under investigation. Thus, to learn about “normal” behavior, one must properly study individuals who display “normal” tendencies.

We propose that evolutionary psychology, as it applies to the study of humans’ long-term committed relationships, is at risk of falling into the same trap as early clinical psychology. Much of the recent evolutionary psychological research on romantic relationships has focused on the reasons people might discard a mate, make a pass at a new mate, or be discarded in favor of an alternative mate. Researchers also document the opposite end of the mating process: what people prefer in their mates, or how they select mates. The middle area, that of maintaining and sustaining long term romantic relationships, is paid very little attention by the evolutionary psychological community. This oversight is strange, given that the majority of people, in Canada at least, form long-lasting relationships, such as by marriage. According to the most recent census statistics (Statistics Canada, 2006), 15,202,030 people in a population of 31,074,405 were legally married (including common-law). Of those who reported that they were single, 7,187,135 were never married, 1,460,285 were divorced, 645,235 were separated but not divorced, and 1,538,370 were widowed. Note that the census data includes all of those over 15 years of age, and thus, includes individuals who could not possibly be legally married in Canada, given that one must be 18 years of age to do so. In fact, according to census data, only 4,961,015 individuals are classified as not being a member of a “family” (by census definition) and 9,733,764 individuals are classified as “children” within a family. In any case, the demographic data indicates that many individuals marry, and thus, are faced with the issue of how to overcome difficulties in their long-term committed relationship. As we will demonstrate, based on the current literature, evolutionary psychologists are showing a tendency to focus on the more interesting or sensational aspects of behavior, such as how one “shops around” for a mate or the feelings associated with extra-pair copulations, and have consequently ignored important but potentially less exciting and more mundane behaviors that may occur on a more routine basis, such as how a couple works through difficult, and perhaps boring, times in order to remain together.

Forming long-lasting romantic relationships has many advantages. Compared to many other species, the children of humans have benefited from the high levels of investment provided by both parents (e.g., Daly & Wilson, 1983), which means that men and women tend to form long-term relationships with parental investment and commitment to their partners. Such relationships also provide, within an evolutionary framework, benefits conferred from social alliances and coalition formation with extended families. Moreover, evidence indicates that sexual relationships that are long-term rather than brief or short-term increase the odds of successful pregnancies (Robillard et al., 1994). Thus, although there could be benefits from ending one’s relationship or seeking extra-pair sexual interactions (e.g., Thornhill & Gangestad, 2008) the benefits of having a stable and lasting long-term relationship should not be dismissed. Further, formal marriage agreements exist in every culture in the world (Brown, 1991), which indicates that there are universal and cross-cultural benefits to marriage that should be explored within an evolutionary framework.

We concede that very long-term monogamous relationships may reflect the role of the church or state on people's lives, or be specific to socio-cultural influences in westernized industrial societies. However, regardless of the immediate cause, it is unlikely that the many individuals will perform behaviors that violate evolutionary pressures and will remain in a long-term relationship for some arbitrary reason. Thus, we suggest that studying why and how dyads stay together is relevant within an evolutionary context. In particular, we believe that relationship maintenance is most evident when one is forced, such as during a time of relationship stress, to find a reason not to dissolve the relationship.

The Behavior of the Majority is not the Focus

We find it very intriguing that relationship maintenance is not central to investigations by evolutionary psychologists when it presumably represents an issue faced by the majority of people in society. For example, in Canada, for 2005, the divorce rate was 38.3 per 100 marriages by the 30th wedding anniversary. Approximately 62% of married individuals remain married, at least until their 30th anniversary. It is curious, then, why evolutionary psychology has not addressed an issue that the majority of married individuals (or at least married Canadians) face. It is entirely probable that these are not all happy marriages, and it would be utopian to suspect that they are all monogamous relationships involving faithful, loyal mates. Still, though, there is a large portion of the population who likely do not undertake many of the behaviors (such as infidelity or mate poaching) that are examined by evolutionary psychologists. A recent national survey of Americans showed that approximately 20% to 25% report one or more acts of sexual infidelity during their lifetime (Atkins, Baucom & Jacobson, 2001; Laumann, Gagnon, Michael, & Michaels, 1994); thus, the majority either do not report such behavior or do not actually engage in these acts. Furthermore, there is presumably also a segment of the population for which infidelity is not a sufficient reason to dissolve a long-term relationship.

Mate poaching might occur more frequently; Schmitt and Buss (2001) report that of those undergraduates in romantic relationships (which was about 57%), 12% of men and 24% of women said they had poached their current partner. In a second, small ($n = 31$) sample of those over 30, 73% of men and 82% of women were in a relationship, and of these, 27% of men and 26% of women had poached. What remains unknown, however, is whether these individuals considered themselves to be in a long-term committed relationship now, or whether the person was in such a relationship when they were poached. While we do not dispute the reported data, we find it curious that the incidence rate for mate poaching is so high, given that so many Canadians remain married, at least until their 30-year anniversary.

We now review some of the recent evolutionary psychological literature on romantic interpersonal relationships to highlight the types of topics that are of research interest, and then specifically mention the few studies that address romantic relationship maintenance. Our goal is to illustrate that although initial inroads have been made on the topic of relationship maintenance among those who are in a committed relationship, these gains have been minor in comparison to our understanding of how and why romantic relationships end or begin. As evidence of our hypothesis, we use citation counts from the PsychINFO online database to show that specific topics (e.g., mate poaching) are more cited, and hence more studied, than other topics (e.g., relationship maintenance). We will

then present the results of a short exploratory study in which we investigated why people remain in their romantic relationships during times when relationships are at risk.

Ending the Relationship

The ultimate, and perhaps most spectacular, technique for ending a romantic relationship is the killing of one's spouse. The study of spousal homicide has received considerable attention from evolutionary psychologists. For example, Wilson and Daly's (1992) paper on the topic of who kills whom in spousal homicide has been cited 126 times. Others have examined different aspects of the topic, such as how reproductively aged women are the most frequent victims (Shackelford, Buss & Peters, 2000) and perpetrators (Shackelford, 2000) of spousal homicide. However, while interesting, spousal homicide is still a rarely occurring phenomena; in Canada only 74 spousal homicides occurred in 2005, for example (The Daily, 2006). We acknowledge that patterns within such homicides are interesting and can provide real-world data to test evolutionary-based theories, but they do not provide significant, direct information on how couples maintain their committed relationships. As well, one could argue that spousal homicide is sometimes perpetrated by the mentally ill, and may not always be an accurate indicator of "normal" behavior.

Another way to end a relationship is to submit to a mate poacher. Mate poaching is "behavior intended to attract someone who is already in a romantic relationship" (p. 894, Schmitt & Buss, 2001). Schmitt and Buss' (2001) article alone has been cited by 62 entries in the database PsycINFO, with the most recent being the hands-on killing of romantic partners (Mize, Shackelford & Shackelford, 2009).

Infidelity is a major cause of divorce (Atkins, Yi, Baucom & Christensen, 2005; Betzig, 1989) and is one topic in particular that has received attention from this research community. Buss, Larsen, Westen and Semmelroth (1992; cited 308 times in PsycINFO) demonstrated that infidelity can be partitioned into the categories of emotional and sexual infidelity. They argue that jealousy resulting from one's partner pursuing a form of infidelity reflects our evolved heritage. That is, men are more jealous about their partner's sexual infidelity, and women are more jealous of emotional infidelity. At face value, studies on infidelity support our hypothesis that evolutionary psychologists are focusing on potential reasons for romantic relationships to dissolve, given that it does lead to divorce for many couples. However, one must remember that only 38.3% of Canadian married couples do not reach their 30th anniversary, and thus, regardless of its incident rate, the majority of relationships are not dissolved as a result of infidelity.

The issue, however, is rather convoluted because jealousy can be viewed as a mate retention tactic, or an emotion that is necessary for one to maintain their relationship. Jealousy is a way for mates to demonstrate that they care about their partner (Buss, 2000). Thus, one could argue that by studying infidelity, or jealousy in particular, evolutionary psychologists are examining, albeit indirectly, a mate retention tactic used to maintain a romantic relationship.

Perhaps a more direct way of examining the issues surrounding the sustainment of long-term relationships is by studying mate guarding, in which an individual performs tactics to guard a mate from any potential infiltrator (i.e., prevent mate poaching), or at least, to prevent an infiltrators' sexual access to the mate. One of the earliest evolutionary-based articles on the topic was by Buss (1988), who outlined various tactics and strategies that one could undertake; 80 entries in PsycINFO cite this paper. When

scanning this list of entries, though, one is immediately struck by the predominance of the word “aggression” (5) and “violence” (10, with one additional reference to homicide and one more for killing), as well as those that deal with infidelity (7). Although violence and aggressive acts certainly occur within romantic relationships, it is curious that this has been a focus for researchers’ attention, when surely other strategies are used to maintain one’s relationship (e.g., enhancing or editing personality attributes, spending time with common friends, having children, pooling resources). Therefore, although there has been some, limited attention towards the techniques that may be used for the maintenance of romantic relationships, it has not been direct or very thorough.

Initial Relationship Formation

The absence of research on relationship maintenance is even more startling when one considers the plethora of studies in evolutionary psychology pertaining to initial mate selection, mating strategies, and issues surrounding the ways that people identify potentially good mates. Within PsycINFO, the subject of mate selection (along with keywords human and evolution) yielded 374 entries. Mate preferences (with keywords human and evolution) lead to 67 entries. Again, these studies outnumber those that address how and why people sustain their current romantic relationships. Perhaps one explanation for this discrepancy is that the former is simply more sensational and of inherent interest to researchers, while the latter is more benign and less exciting.

To explain, it is useful to demonstrate an analogous process that is occurring within the mate preference area. Based on the focus of the current literature, researchers are overlooking similarities that people share in their mate preferences in order to explore the more sensational (and perhaps more easy to experimentally and statistically test) sex differences. One of the first evolutionary psychological attempts to explore mate preferences was by Buss (1989), who found that, internationally amongst 37 cultures and 10,047 people, both women and men place the highest preference upon the personality attributes of kindness and understanding; indeed, it is a necessity and not a luxury when choosing a mate (Li, Kenrick, Bailey, & Linsenmeier, 2002). However, instead of being reflected in the scientific literature, there is much more attention paid to the less important and sex differentiated preferences of women seeking men with resources and men seeking women who are physically attractive. A recent analysis of the popularity of specific topics showed sex differences in general remain central to evolutionary psychology (Webster, Jonason, & Schember, 2009). Moreover, this focus seems juxtaposed with the previous social psychological literature that suggests, for example, that both men and women desire to date physically attractive individuals, independent of any other characteristic, including aptitude, personality characteristics, self-esteem, intelligence and social skills (Hatfield, Aronson, Abrahams, & Rottman, 1966). The focus on sex differences is not entirely without some merit; we fully agree that the sexes have evolved distinct strategies, mate preferences and such. What is disturbing, though, is that there has seemingly been no attempt to align the current focus on sex differences with the earlier social psychology experiments to address what people, regardless of their sex, seek and prefer in a mate. That is, even though people, regardless of their sex express that they prefer kind and understanding mates, this universal mate preference has been seemingly cast aside in order to pursue ones that show sex differences. For similar reasons, we believe that the study of relationship maintenance, which most Canadians in committed relationships will successfully perform for at least 30 years, has been ignored

in favor of studies on the less frequently occurring behaviors of mate poaching, infidelity, and spousal homicide, for example.

Long-Term Romantic Relationship Maintenance

Compared to the literature mentioned above, relationship maintenance (along with human and evolution) yielded only three entries in PsycINFO. Thus, a more indirect approach was needed to explore how the field has examined this issue. Four possibilities are to investigate the devaluation of alternative mates, the factors that lead to divorce, overall assessment of marital satisfaction, and mate retention tactics. What is interesting about these approaches is that they are not well studied, as compared to the other areas we have discussed, and that together, they do not provide much information on how couples actually work through the difficult times they face.

The first issue – devaluing alternative mates – rests on the work of social psychologists Johnson and Rusbult (1989) who demonstrated that individuals who were highly committed to their relationships actively, and perhaps even consciously, derogated available, attractive opposite-sex individuals on interpersonal dimensions such as intelligence and faithfulness. Their research was extended by Simpson, Gangestad and Lerma (1990), who compared the attractiveness ratings performed by individuals currently involved in romantic relationships against those not currently involved in a relationship. They found that photographs of young, opposite-sex models were rated as less attractive by participants in committed relationships than they were by single participants, while both groups had similar ratings for same-sex models and for older models. This difference in relationship status was not due to differences in self-esteem, participant attractiveness, empathy, or similar traits. Simpson and colleagues concluded that the participants devalued the attractiveness of the young, opposite-sex models as a way of maintaining their current relationships. By not perceiving extra-dyadic individuals as attractive, thus devaluing them, participants were less likely to jeopardize their current relationships. These findings were then replicated and extended by Lydon, Meana, Sepinwall, Richards and Mayman (1999). Lydon et al. asked participants to evaluate the attractiveness of a target individual, based on his/her biographical information and photograph. They constructed two different targets; one was a “moderate threat,” in that s/he was attractive, and the second was a “high threat,” in that s/he was attractive and expressed an attraction to the participant. Individuals currently involved in a relationship but with low or high levels of commitment responded similarly to uninvolved individuals and did not devalue the attractiveness of the moderate threat target. In contrast, individuals with moderate levels of commitment devalued the attractiveness of the moderate threat target. Likewise, individuals with high levels of commitment devalued high threat targets. Maner, Rouby and Gonzaga (2008) extended these results and found that when they elicited thoughts and feelings of romantic love in participants, participants reduced their visual attention to potential alternative mates of high physical attractiveness.

When examining the second issue – factors that might lead to divorce – of particular note is the ethological work of Glenn and Carol Weisfeld, who have explored in cross-cultural samples the ways that marriages, and particularly, divorce reflect our evolved history. For example, they have found that spouses who fail to maintain a sufficiently high mate value are vulnerable to divorce, and that infertility, sexual dissatisfaction and child death predict divorce (e.g., Weisfeld & Weisfeld, 2002). The

data also suggest that men who are cruel or poor providers and women who are sexually unfaithful are also prone to be divorced. They have examined broader factors, such as the role of local economics and industrialization and the influence of the couple's parents. Although highly informative, this work is centered upon issues that lead to divorce, rather than the ways that individuals endure hardship and remain a dyad.

The third topic – marital satisfaction – is promising in that it deals with how people promote partner and personal satisfaction within their relationship as a maintenance device. One example is Shackelford and Buss' (1997) chapter on the evolutionary psychology behind marital satisfaction based on data the second author collected from 107 married couples. In this article, they argue that discrepancies in relative mate value may lead to marital dissatisfaction, as does possessiveness, unfaithfulness, and personality characteristics such as disagreeableness. In the final four pages, they outline an evolutionary analysis of happy marriages, with a focus on what factors predict marital satisfaction. They divide these factors into those that are personality based, mate-guarding tactics, and spousal sources of anger, upset or irritation, and it is essentially the flip side of their work on dissatisfaction that appears earlier in the chapter. Although this line of research is promising in that it addresses an important issue that affects long-term committed relationships, this chapter is currently uncited, according to PsycINFO.

The fourth and most important issue – mate retention – was initially explored by Buss and Shackelford (1997), who examined an assortment of 19 tactics used by 107 married couples. They found that men's use of tactics was dependent on their partner's youth, attractiveness, and fidelity, whereas women's use of tactics was dependent on their partner's income and ambition. As for specific tactics, men reported using resource displays and insulting their partner, whereas women reported investing more effort to improve their appearance. Men were also more likely to utter threats at potential same-sex threats, while women used more verbal signs of possession. This paper was cited by 130 entries in PsycINFO; of these, 11 had the word violence in their titles (plus two on aggression, one on homicide, one on battered spouses, two on victimology, two on sexual coercion, and two on wife killing). An additional eight entries were on infidelity, and 13 on jealousy, with three entries listed as spanning both topics. As for the remaining entries, the majority are introductory textbooks to the field, or general books on sexuality. Thus, although this paper has been frequently cited, it has not had the influence on evolutionary psychological research that one might expect. This is most unfortunate, as this paper comes the closest to addressing the topic of long-term committed relationship maintenance from an evolutionary perspective. However, while this work provides a promising and enlightening start on the topic of relationship maintenance, it does not fully examine the reasons and situations affecting the use of a particular technique. For example, are these mate retention tactics used on a frequent basis simply to keep the mate, or are they used when faced with a specific difficulty? As well, the list the authors generated include many tactics that might be considered as showing a negative, albeit accurate, side of personality. Perhaps when dealing with potential difficulties, couples work together to increase the overall positive experience of being in the relationship itself.

It should be mentioned that the topic of mate retention was also explored by Campbell and Ellis (2005), who propose that the emotions of anger and upset are mechanisms that serve to help individuals maintain their relationships, and thus, this area

is not about just sexual behaviors or hypotheses motivated by parental investment theory. This chapter remains uncited in PsycINFO.

Of the four areas reviewed, this literature on mate retention is the closest in that it begins to explore the mechanisms of working marriages and how people strive to maintain their existing relationships. It extends this focus to show under what circumstances people stop making an effort to retain their mates and their relationship.

Although, collectively, these studies are highly informative and represent some initial steps at understanding long-term committed relationships, they still do not fully address how individuals deal with obstacles to their long-term romantic relationships. So, for example, when faced with “bad times,” what makes the couple remain together? To address this question, we conducted an exploratory study to motivate our, and others’, future research.

Exploratory Study

The purpose of the this study was to examine some of the potential reasons for why people maintain their current relationships during difficult times, as well as their satisfaction with their current relationship and partner. Given that our focus is on evolutionary psychology, we hypothesized that individuals would consider issues such as the sharing of resources, family members’ (e.g., parents’) concerns, friend’s opinions, and shared care for children, as particularly important, since these have elements that would be linked to the advantages of long-term committed relationships that were mentioned previously. We also included “good memories,” as anecdotal evidence suggests that individuals may hope that the situation will improve and return to a positive state. Furthermore, Rusbult (1980) suggests that shared memories represent a resource that individuals may consider as an investment in their current relationship.

Methods

Participants

We collected data from a convenience sample of university students. All participants were students at an eastern Canadian university, at any year of study, and received a small course credit for their participation. A total of 90 women (age in years, $M = 20.47$, $SD = 3.71$, range 18 to 50) and 25 men ($M = 22.08$, $SD = 5.60$, range 18 to 47) participated. Note that participants were instructed to complete the survey only if they were currently in what they considered a long-term, committed relationship. The length of time in a committed romantic relationship reported in weeks was $M = 107.23$ ($SD = 199.02$) for women, and $M = 138.80$ ($SD = 130.49$) for men. An independent t -test on duration revealed no significant sex difference, $t(113) = 0.75$, $p > .05$. There was also no significant sex difference in satisfaction with the current relationship (scale 1 = not satisfied, 5 = very satisfied), $t(113) = .40$, $p > .05$, men $M = 4.20$ ($SD = .93$) and women $M = 4.11$ ($SD = .99$). Likewise, there was no significant difference in how the sexes perceive their partner’s satisfaction with the relationship, $t(113) = .02$, $p > .05$; men $M = 4.24$ ($SD = .93$) and women $M = 4.24$ ($SD = .81$). When asked if they thought they could find a better partner, 40% of men said yes as did 26% of women. However, only 8% of men and 2% of women were seeking a different partner. Finally, 8% of men and 9% of women were planning to end their current relationship.

Measures and Procedures

A short inventory was created that asked participants the following: “Which of the following reasons inspire you to maintain your relationship during difficult times. Check all that apply.” The list, selected to represent evolutionarily relevant factors, was composed of: family (e.g., parents’) concerns, your children, good memories, financial concerns, your friend’s opinions, and an “other” category for which participants were asked to provide details. Demographic information was also collected, as was data pertaining to the level or satisfaction with their relationship. After providing consent, participants completed this short inventory as a paper-and-pencil survey in private and then returned it to the researcher in a sealed envelope.

Results

We performed chi-square analyses separately by sex to explore the reasons people maintain their relationships during difficult times. For both women and men, “good memories” was a significant factor, in that the proportions indicated that the majority selected the option. Of the women 75% checked this reason, ($\chi^2 = 22.75, p < .000$) and, although not significant, 68% of the men ($\chi^2 = 3.24, p = .07$). The other reasons were not significant according to the analysis. “Family concerns” was selected by 32% of women and 24% of men, and similarly, “financial concerns” was chosen by 7% of women and 16% of men. The caring of children was selected by only 3% of women and no men, perhaps due to the youth of the sample; one man and two women reported having children. Finally, “friends’ concerns” was selected by 19% of women and 4% of men.

We also allowed participants to include other reasons for why they had remained in their relationship during difficult times. Two men wrote that the difficult times will always come to an end, and 32% wrote they were in love. Interestingly, 16% of women also wrote that they were “in love” as a reason for remaining in their current relationship. Two women listed good sexual chemistry, one commented on the comfort and reliability offered by her mate, and one said, “I’m married and divorce is really expensive.” Another woman mentioned that there have not been any difficult times. Participants were also asked in an open-ended question to report why they were with their current partner. The most common themes were feelings concerning companionship (e.g., getting along well, are friends, compatible), feelings of love, expression of having fun with their partner, and a general sense of happiness.

Discussion

In our exploratory study, we examined some of the reasons that people in long-term committed relationships stay together during difficult times. We found that “good memories” is the most frequently selected reason, exceeding reasons that have a more direct evolutionary tie, such as the concerns of family members or friends, the caring of children or the sharing of resources. This finding was surprising in that it suggests that there must be a less direct, but highly important, evolutionary factor that is responsible for the majority of individuals in committed relationships for not dissolving their relationship during times of relationship stress.

The main limitation with this study is that our findings rest on a convenience sample of undergraduate students who have limited life experience. Although these adults likely experience many of the same emotions and are confronted by the same issues of relationship maintenance as older populations, the age of participants is a limitation with the current work. However, from an evolutionary perspective, our sample reflects a highly fertile (i.e., those with high reproductive value) segment of the population for whom relationship formation and maintenance is very relevant. That said, we did not fully explore the depth of commitment displayed by our sample and remain uncertain as to whether the relationships the participants have formed are of a lasting nature and will lead towards having offspring.

Another limitation with the study is that the sample was of young adults in university of whom only three had children. Thus, if we were to collect data on an older sample of adults who have children, children might become more important as a reason to stay together during difficult times. As well, many of these individuals likely do not own homes together or share the same level of financial responsibility as do older adults, and thus, the importance placed upon this factor was also potentially reduced. However, university students are often financially limited and the sharing of resources is frequently necessary. Thus, it was expected that this factor would be a very important reason to stay together, and yet was only selected by a minority. It is also interesting how little influence family and friends have as a reason for a couple to work through their difficulties. We expected that at an age when the participants had left home and were establishing an identity that was distinct to that they had within their family, the impact of friends would be significantly higher.

As an aside, it is important to note that the vast majority of psychological research, including that within evolutionary psychology, relies upon undergraduate samples. One reviewer of this paper suggested that this reliance on young adults is the key factor in shaping evolutionary psychology, more so than the wish to explore sensational topics. This issue has been addressed by others, such as Voracek (2001) who documented the need for representative, community-based samples, and highlighted how the reliance on undergraduates is leading to erroneous generalizations. Although we agree that studying the behaviors of young adults limits the types of data one can collect or the research questions that can be asked, the reliance on this group does not fully explain why the topics in evolutionary psychology have remained so narrowly focused. When researchers do have access to the broader population, they continue to focus on issues such as infidelity, mate poaching, and homicide, as reviewed earlier.

One explanation for our findings is that people might be inclined to ascribe the ways they overcome difficulties to internal rather than external factors. Good memories represent something that they have control over and help form; individuals maintain a high internal locus of control by building positive experiences that are memorable (e.g., Myers & Booth, 1999). In contrast, staying with a partner during difficult times because they need to for financial reasons, or because their parents or other family members would become distressed, represents external factors beyond the individual's control. In terms of the locus of control literature on marriages (e.g., Myers & Booth, 1999), these factors might represent external forces to which one must resign oneself, rather than perform independent action out of personal agency.

We had not expected love to be a reason that people will maintain a relationship during difficult times. In the open-ended question that asked why people were with their current partner, happiness was also listed. Therefore, internal emotional states and

personal attitudes should be explored as candidate factors. It could be the case that many people maintain their relationship because their partner simply makes them happy, or they feel deeply loved, regardless of the situation they are facing. As is the case with good memories, happiness and other emotional states can be viewed as resulting from one having strong feelings of control over their personal situation.

It could also be the case that when people are involved in a rewarding, positive relationship, they are more likely to recall positive emotions or memories and use these to help them endure any bad times they encounter, similar to seeing their mate through “rose colored lenses.” Likewise, when in an unrewarding relationship, individuals may be unable to recall positive memories or feelings.

Although we attempted to include factors that have an evolutionary basis, we should have included a wider variety of factors. For example, one issue that may cause people to remain together is that they are planning to have a family and want to have children. No participant mentioned this possibility, but it is a viable option. In retrospect, we could also have used the mate preference and selection literature to help us arrive at factors. For example, we did not include issues related to personality, common interests, or compatibility, although all have been highlighted in the existing mate selection literature (e.g., Buss, 1989). It could be possible that people are deeply committed to their partner because they have shared interests and get along very well, and that these issues help them get through difficult times. Presumably, they selected their mate carefully and the relationship has reached this point in its development because those involved feel a shared connection, and it might be this connection that allows the relationship to continue during any challenges. Future investigations should include a broader sample of candidate factors from which individuals can select.

Participants were asked to complete the brief survey if they were involved in a committed relationship. However, we did not ask participants about the level of their commitment to their partner or the relationship. It could be that those with higher levels of commitment rely upon more of the factors in order to get through difficult times, in an effort to work harder to make the relationship work. It should be noted, however, that participants reported that they were mostly or very satisfied with their current relationship, and hence, one might infer that they were at least moderately committed.

It should be noted that we opted to study how people deal with difficult times as only an example of the type of the research one could undertake in the area of relationship maintenance. To clarify, one must first consider that the study of failed relationships would clearly reveal issues that underlie or motivate relationship dissolution. However, as census data shows, most couples are able to successfully avoid or deal with the issues that lead to the end of the relationship. As well, studying failed relationships to determine how successful relationships work is akin to studying clinical cases, such as those mentioned by Witmer (1907) to determine how average children function. Instead, we used the study of “difficult times” so that we could begin to generalize beyond simply why people might break-up; we sought to identify the more general, or higher-level motivators for remaining within a relationship. Future research needs to examine specific relationship threats and the techniques that successful dyads use to address these threats; a great deal of the reviewed research is promising in this regard in that it addresses various elements of this overarching topic. Some of these threats may be external to the relationship (e.g., a mate poacher) while others are internal (e.g., partners becoming bored with each other). The reliance on good memories, an internally based mechanism, and feelings of love or happiness, together are suggestive of

the fact that the majority of threats a relationship faces are internal in nature, which has not been well studied by evolutionary psychologists.

Conclusion

In this paper, we sought to bring attention to the reasons that long-term committed relationships are maintained during difficult times, as an example of the type of research that remains to be done by evolutionary psychologists. Considering the number of children and widow/ers within the Canadian population, the majority of the population will form this type of relationship, such as by getting married or living common-law. However, this issue seems to have been ignored by most evolutionary psychologists. We provided a review of the literature to indicate the sorts of topics frequently investigated within romantic relationships, and discussed promising lines of research pertaining specifically to marital relationships. The problem, however, remains, in that there exists no research on how these types of relationships are maintained during difficult periods and minimal research on relationship maintenance in general. We then presented a brief exploratory study in an effort to inspire further research into this area. Although our results are based on a short, exploratory study, they provide an introduction to an evolutionary-informed analysis of “normative behavior” which the majority of people experience after they have formed a committed relationship. Relationship maintenance is an issue that all humans who perform pair-bonding face, and yet the experiences of such bonding are not well understood. Future research must begin to address this important and relevant area.

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