



The roles of altruism, heroism, and physical attractiveness in female mate choice



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ABSTRACT

The role of prosocial behaviour in female mate choice has been extensively explored, focusing on the desirability of altruism in potential mates, as well as altruism being a mating signal. However, little research has focused on the desirability of heroism and altruism in potential partners. Furthermore, the synergistic effect of attractiveness on the desirability of prosocial behavior has only recently been explored, and to our knowledge, has not been explored in relation to the desirability of heroism in a romantic partner. We explored the effect of prosociality and attractiveness on female desirability ratings ($n = 198$), and whether desirability was influenced by whether women were seeking a short-term or long-term relationship. We find that women are attracted to men who display heroism and altruism, and this preference is higher when the male is attractive compared to unattractive. Furthermore, preferences for prosocial traits were higher when seeking a long-term compared to a short-term partner. Our findings add to the literature on prosocial behaviour and mate choice. Data and materials [Open Science Framework Project A76P8].

1. Introduction

The role of altruism in mate choice has been extensively explored, showing that this psychological trait can have a positive effect on an individual's romantic desirability. For example, findings indicate strong support that women are attracted to altruism in a mate, particularly for long-term relationships (see Barclay, 2010; Bhogal, Galbraith, & Manktelow, in press; Farrelly, 2011, 2013), and men display altruistic behaviors towards potential romantic partners (Bhogal, Galbraith, & Manktelow, 2016a; Farrelly, Lazarus, & Roberts, 2007; Iredale, van Vugt, & Dunbar, 2008; Tognetti, Berticat, Raymond, & Faurie, 2012). Furthermore, several studies have provided evidence that, in the real world, altruistic people have greater mating success compared to non-altruistic people (Arnocky, Piche, Albert, Oullette, & Barclay, 2017; Stavrova & Ehlebracht, 2015).

These findings suggest that altruism has evolved through sexual selection as a mating signal, an argument which is grounded in the idea that altruism is attractive because it signals future behavior towards a romantic partner and future offspring (Miller, 2000, 2007; Tessman, 1995). This implies that altruism acts as a signal of good partner/

parenting qualities of the altruist (Kokko, 1998). Alternatively, the costly nature of altruistic acts may also be of value in mate choice, as it can be an honest signal of the altruist's good genetic quality (Gintis, Smith, & Bowles, 2001). Which of these two better explains the desirability of altruism? According to Farrelly (2011, 2013), altruism is better explained as a signal of good parenting/partner abilities than good genetic quality, as it is desired more for longer relationships (and by both men and women). This in turn suggests that it can act as a reliable signal of an individual's prosocial nature more generally, such as their kindness (e.g. Buss, 1989), and that this is what is important in the partners we choose.

If, as suggested, it is a general 'altruistic' nature that is important, then in order to further understand why altruism may be desirable in mate choice, attention should be paid to different forms of altruistic behaviors. In other words, it is useful to see what it means to say that 'altruism' is desirable in mate choice. As a psychological characteristic, it can encompass several different traits, such as kindness, helpfulness, generosity, or fairness (Bhogal, Galbraith, & Manktelow, 2016b, 2017). This is reflected in previous research, as several different behaviors are used such as charitable donations (e.g. Iredale et al., 2008), cooperation

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(e.g. Bhogal et al., 2016a; Farrelly et al., 2007), or signals of an ‘altruistic’ personality (e.g. Barclay, 2010; Phillips, Barnard, Ferguson, & Reader, 2008; Stavrova & Ehlebracht, 2015). Similar findings are found for these different altruistic behaviors, which supports the view that it is a more general altruistic nature being signaled by these behaviors, and that they are desired in mate choice. However, caution should be taken when stating that the roles of *all* altruistic behaviors in mate choice are equivalent. For example, Ehlebracht, Stavrova, Fetchenhauer, and Farrelly (2018) found that the desirability of trustworthiness followed a different pattern to that of other altruistic behaviors, which the authors argued is due to the different adaptive value of trustworthiness in mate choice. Therefore, this suggests that the role of altruistic behaviors may be more nuanced than the above research originally suggested. This suggests that further investigation of different forms of altruistic or prosocial behaviors is vital to aid our understanding of their role in romantic relationships.

One such form is heroism, originally examined by Kelly and Dunbar (2001), who found that women were particularly attracted to acts of heroism over altruism for both short-term and long-term relationships. However, since their paper was published, several studies have solely focused on the role of altruism in mate choice, instead of heroism, which we believe leaves a gap in the literature. Furthermore, in research using heroic fictional characters in romantic literature, women preferred a long-term relationship with a heroic character (Kruger, Fisher, & Jobling, 2003). Consistent with these findings, bravery seen in war heroes was also found to be attractive among women, especially when characters are awarded a medal for their bravery (Rusch, Leunissen, & van Vugt, 2015). However, it is important to note that women have been found to be attracted to acts of heroism which involve bravery and risk-taking, as opposed to risky behavior from which there is not an element of helping behavior (Farthing, 2005). This is possibly due to this latter type of risk-taking behavior portraying careless behavior, which when applied to a female's mate choice for a long-term partner, could be considered as a risky investment towards future offspring.

2. Heroism as an ‘altruistic’ trait

Although one could suggest that heroism and altruism are relatively similar (since they both involve personal cost), there may be rudimentary characteristics differing between these two behavioural traits. Altruism (in relation to female mate choice) may be seen as an honest signal within a potential partner, signaling a man will be reliable and provide support for future offspring (Miller, 2000). Heroism, on the other hand, signals intention to take risks for another, suggesting it is a riskier behavior compared to altruism. Moreover, heroism may have evolved as a higher form of altruism (Smirnov, Arrow, Kennett, & Orbell, 2007) and both traits are thought to be a signal of indirect phenotypic qualities of cooperativeness (Farrelly, 2011). However, heroism can be demonstrated by means of civil courage (Greitemeyer, Osswald, Fischer, & Frey, 2007) and it can also result in negative consequences for the heroic individual, where one can put their own life at risk. Altruism is often associated with a positive outcome from helping others (Post, 2005) and rarely involves a threat to one's life. Therefore, heroism can be considered a more extreme trait than altruism (or indeed a more extreme manifestation of altruism). Importantly though, in relation to female mate choice, both traits can be perceived to be honest signals of a long-term partner's inclination towards future parental care and protection towards a partner and future offspring (Kokko, 1998). This would mean that they can both signal the same general altruistic nature, and that they should be similarly desired in mate choice.

Men have reported higher willingness to take certain risks across a wide variety of domains when under mate choice contexts, suggesting risk taking behavior is a mating strategy (Greitemeyer, Kastenmüller, & Fischer, 2013). This kind of behavior has been exhibited using virtual

reality technology, where males crossed a virtual bridge faster in the presence of a female observer than a male observer (Frankenhuis, Dotsch, Karremans, & Wigboldus, 2010). This suggests that, similarly to altruism, men display heroic/risky behavior as a mating strategy. In addition, Ronay and Hippel (2010) found that young male skateboarders, when in the presence of female observers, performed risky tricks even when there was a chance of physical harm.

3. Current study

As a result of the aforementioned literature, there is good reason to empirically test whether the roles of heroism and other altruistic traits are similar in mate choice. Therefore, this study aimed to examine the roles of heroism *and* altruism in a mate choice context, similar to Kelly and Dunbar (2001). To do so, we adopted a similar methodology to that of Farrelly, Clemson, and Guthrie (2016) who explored whether female preferences for altruism were influenced by the physical attractiveness of potential mates. They found that when women read vignettes involving men's displays of either altruistic or non-altruistic behaviour (with images of low and high attractiveness), they desired a long-term partner who displayed altruism, even when the scenario was accompanied by images of men of low attractiveness. This suggests that altruism is perceived as more important than physical attractiveness alone for long-term partners. Therefore, it will be seen here whether these preferences for prosocial traits also apply to risk-prone behaviour, such as heroism.

Therefore, the main objectives of this study are to add to the growing literature surrounding altruism, and extend it based on heroism in regard to females' mate choice. To do so, the potential synergistic effect of physical attractiveness on desirability, which Farrelly et al. (2016) explored, was employed here in relation to both heroism and altruism. Similar to previous studies, this study used scenarios consisting of male facial images of varying attractiveness, combined with scenarios which contained behaviors which were either low or high in altruism/heroism. This research also aims to build on previous theories surrounding female mate choice, which suggest that certain prosocial and courageous behaviour towards non-kin may have evolved for attracting a mate, as these signals are costly in nature (Zahavi, 1995).

4. Hypotheses

Based on the aforementioned literature, we hypothesize that the role of both altruism and heroism as signals in mate choice, will be similar. Therefore, we predicted that for both heroism and altruism, displays of high levels of these traits will be rated more desirable than displays of low levels of these traits (hypothesis 1). In addition, we expected this preference for high levels of both traits would be greater for long-term than short-term relationships for both heroism and altruism (hypothesis 2). Finally, we predicted that physical attractiveness and trait level will interact to positively influence women's desirability, particularly for long-term relationships (hypothesis 3).

5. Method

5.1. Participants and design

Participants were 198 heterosexual women from a UK university (Mean age = 19.86 years old, $SD = 2.99$), recruited using an opportunistic sampling method, through the department's research participation scheme. Only females were recruited (consistent with Farrelly et al., 2016), as previous research has suggested females are the choosier sex in mate choice, as they are predicted to invest more in their offspring (Trivers, 1972). Participants completed the study online, via Bristol Online Survey (www.onlinesurveys.ac.uk). This study was approved by the research ethics committee at the university where the

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