

Original Article

Trade-offs in a dangerous world: women's fear of crime predicts preferences for aggressive and formidable mates

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Abstract

Women's mate selection criteria can be expected to include a preference for men who can protect them and their offspring. However, aggressive dominance and physical formidability are not an unalloyed good in a partner; as such, men are likely to be coercive toward their mates. Accordingly, because of the potential costs of living with an aggressively dominant and physically formidable mate, a woman's preferences in this regard can be expected to vary as a function of the appraisal of her vulnerability to aggression — the more that a woman sees herself as potentially benefiting from protection, the more that she can be expected to favor aggressive dominance and physical formidability in a mate. Across three Internet-based studies of US women, we found evidence consistent with this perspective, such that women's fear of crime predicted her preference for long-term mates who are aggressively dominant and physically formidable.

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1. Introduction

1.1. Women's mate preferences for men who offer protection

Diverse evidence suggests that violence was a significant determinant of female fitness in ancestral populations. Compared to men, women are generally more vulnerable to male violence due to sexual dimorphism in stature, muscle size and composition (Frayser & Wolpoff, 1985) and aggressivity (Daly & Wilson, 1988). In the past, this greater vulnerability would have been compounded by obligatory female care of infants (Geary & Flinn, 2001, 2002; Taylor et al., 2000). Sexual assault in particular would likely have been a source of selective pressure acting on the psychology of women (Smuts, 1992), as rape decreases female fitness via the costs of physical trauma, by reducing female choice and by compromising mate value (Campbell & Soeken, 1999; Duntley, 2005;

Malamuth, Huppin, & Paul, 2005). In addition to dyadic violence, extrapolations from ethnographic, historical and archeological data suggest that both within- and between-group violence in the forms of feuding, raiding and warfare were common throughout evolutionary history (Biocca, 1971; Gat, 1999, 2000a, 2000b; Keeley, 1996; LeBlanc, 2003; Morgan, 1980), and that homicide, sexual assault and resource appropriation or destruction are likely to have occurred with sufficient frequency to have recurrently impacted female fitness.

Investigators have theorized that violence was a source of selective pressure shaping the psychology of women's mate selection preferences, as individual men differ in their ability to protect their partners from aggression (Buss & Schmitt, 1993; Buss, 1994; Ellis, 1992; Geary, 2002; Symons, 1979). However, to date, only limited findings speak to the theory that women have preferences for men who can provide protection from violence. A handful of studies have suggested that men's ability and willingness to protect women is among women's criteria for male friends (Bleske-Rechek & Buss, 2001), extra-pair and short-term mating partners (Greiling & Buss, 2000; Li & Kenrick,

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2006), and dating partners (Ellis, 1998; Ellis, Simpson, & Campbell, 2002). Existing findings suggest that, some women include men's protective abilities in their short-term mate selection criteria. However, there is little direct evidence that such considerations play an important role in women's evaluations of prospective partners and/or that such considerations play any role in the selection of long-term mates. The dearth of evidence for male protection playing a role in long-term mate selection reflects an empirical gap the present research is intended to address. Central to this enterprise is the recognition that, from the woman's perspective, a male partner's ability and willingness to protect a mate can be a double-edged sword. Specifically, we suggest that the traits that allow men to deter threatening competitors and prevail in agonistic encounters — coerciveness, aggressiveness and physical formidability — can be costly to their female partners.

Although the ability to supplant competitors may reflect ambition, index earning potential and lead to higher status, domineering and aggressive men may nevertheless often be avoided as long-term mates because coordination and cooperation are at a premium in pair bonds (Snyder, Kirkpatrick & Barrett, 2008). While there are reasons to expect convergence between the interests of men and women, there are conflicts of interest as well. As the lower-investing sex (Trivers, 1972/2002), men typically invest less in their offspring than will women and are more likely than women to divert resources toward obtaining additional mating opportunities. The more the investment strategies of the sexes diverge, the greater the conflict of interests between them. Aggressive and domineering men may be more likely to employ coercive tactics in negotiating these conflicts, including violence and abandonment or threats thereof. Moreover, issues of relative investment are not the sole source of conflict, as women will themselves sometimes benefit from relations with extra-pair partners (Pillsworth & Haselton, 2006), a strategy that can result in male fitness-reducing misallocation of paternal investment. While being more domineering and aggressive may or may not be related to higher mate-guarding vigilance, it is plausible that such men are more likely to aggress against their partners in response to the possibility of cuckoldry.

Consistent with the above propositions, evidence suggests that the use of aggression for personal gain outside of the home is one predictor of partner abuse (Lorber & O'Leary, 2004; O'Leary, Malone, & Tyree, 1994). Correspondingly, Figueredo, Gladden, and Beck (2010) recently reported that interpersonal aggression toward same-sex and opposite-sex conspecifics are highly correlated. More broadly, while dominance as a personality trait is not isomorphic with aggressiveness, it is nonetheless frequently characterized by coercion in agentic self-interest (Gurtman, 1992; Trapnell & Wiggins, 1990); similarly, while coerciveness is not isomorphic with aggressiveness, the two are nevertheless strongly associated (e.g., Hawley, 2003). Dominance–coercion–aggression thus form a clear psycho-

behavioral constellation such that, while individuals use different strategies at different times, such men are likely to use similar tactics in dealing with both his male rivals and his female partner. Indeed, the ability to prevail in male–male violence, and hence to also provide protection from it, is a function of both personality and morphology and, importantly, these two facets are linked. Recent findings from Californian undergraduates suggest that men who are physically stronger than average tend to be involved in more fights, endorse coercion more and respond to transgressions with more anger than is true of other men (Sell, Tooby, & Cosmides, 2009). Likewise, results from India indicate that larger, stronger young men report more physical aggression than their smaller counterparts (Archer & Thanzami, 2007; Archer & Thanzami, 2009). This is not to say that we anticipate that all large, formidable men will always have an aggressive self-presentation. Rather, we suggest that a significant fraction of formidable men may resort to the same coercive tactics in the face of conflicts of interest with their romantic partners that they employ in conflicts of interest with same-sex conspecifics.

1.2. *Women face trade-offs in violent environments*

To summarize the above, conflicts of interest are common within mateships, and aggressively dominant men who are physically formidable (hereafter termed 'aggressive–formidable' men) may be more likely to employ violence and coercion to resolve such conflicts in their favor. Yet, intuition suggests that some women nonetheless appear to be attracted to such men as potential long-term partners, and some women seem to select these men in spite of the availability of alternative partners who are less likely to be coercive. Conventional approaches view women who are attracted to coercive and aggressive men as suffering from deficits in self-esteem, deficits in healthy attachment style, preferences for possessive men, a desire to recreate and renegotiate past negative relationship dynamics, or a desire to confirm negative beliefs and expectations with regard to relationship experiences (Bradley, Schwartz, & Kaslow, 2005; Breitenbecher, 2001; Van Bruggen, Runtz, & Kadlec, 2006; Zayas & Shoda, 2007). In contrast to proximate explanations that are often framed in terms of deficiencies, we argue that women's variable preferences for male aggressive formidability are also understood as the product of evolved psychological mechanisms that respond to a woman's assessment of her circumstances; those preferences that appear puzzling, distressing or even pathological to middle- and upper-class investigators may thus be partly explicable as reflecting reactions to experiences to which the latter are rarely exposed.

Cultural environments vary in the degree to which dominance-based strategies for obtaining status in local intrasexual competitions are effective, as groups differ in the extent to which they recognize aggression as a legitimate means of conflict resolution (e.g., compare Boehm, 1984,

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