Entry Title

Altruism: female mate preferences

Authors

Manpal Singh Bhogal [1] & Daniel Farrelly [2]

Affiliations

[1] School of Psychology, University of Wolverhampton, City Campus, Wulfruna Street, WV1 1LY, UK

[2] School of Psychology, University of Worcester, St John's Campus, Henwick Grove, Worcester, WR2 6AJ, UK

Synonyms

Prosociality; Generosity

Altruism: female mate preferences

In broad terms, altruism refers to self-sacrificial behaviour direct towards another person or persons (Trivers, 1972). Altruism is often thought to be a positive trait and/or behavior, as altruism can often lead to long-term societal and personal benefits through reciprocity and reputation building. Although initially problematic to the theory of natural selection, due to the reduced fitness costs associated with altruistic behavior, researchers soon began examining the role of altruism in human psychology, and in this entry, the focus will be on the role of altruism in female mate choice.

Sexual selection theory posits that traits which provide reproductive success tend to evolve through intra and inter-sexual competition. These traits can include phenotypic and genetic traits which

increase reproductive success. Inter-sexual competition can lead to evolved traits that provide an individual with an advantage mating rivals other members of the same sex, favouring behavioral and/or physical traits that increase one's desirability to the opposite sex (Sefcek et al., 2007). Traits selected through inter-sexual competition can be honest signals of one's quality as a mating partner, assisting in attracting and reproduction, linked to the Handicap Principle (Zahavi, 1975).

Research suggests that altruism is a mating signal, evolved as a sexually selected trait through inter-sexual competition (Zahavi, 1995, see Bhogal et al., 2019 for a review of the literature), increasing one's chances of securing mating partners. According to Parental Investment Theory (Trivers, 1972), women invest far more into human offspring than men do, and therefore choose partners who display good partner/parental qualities, such as altruism. In support, altruistic men are argued to be better partners and fathers for shared offspring than non-altruistic men (Miller, 2007), hence why altruism is a desirable trait to women. As a result, altruism contributes to one's mating efforts and reproductive success, evidenced by research showing altruism increases reproductive success in humans (Allen et al., 2023; Arnocky et al., 2017). This female preference for altruistic men has been supported by a existing research. Research shows that the preference for altruism in a man is present when seeking a long-term relationship compared to short-term relationships, as good partner/parental qualities are needed for long-term provision of offspring and maintaining a long-term romantic relationship. This finding has been well established in the literature (Barclay, 2010; Bhogal et al., 2019; Farrelly, 2013; Farrelly et al., 2016; Moore et al., 2013). All research cited above has found when we present women with a range of characteristics and manipulate altruism, women find altruism to be a desirable trait in mate choice.

Previous research has explored the attractiveness of altruism in relation to other traits, such as physical attractiveness (which indicates genetic quality – Farrelly et al., 2016) and resource potential (Skilton & Farrelly, 2022). In the former study, researchers found that women preferred altruism over physical attractiveness for long-term relationships. In the latter study, researchers found that altruism was rated as more desirable than resource potential for long-term relationships. Furthermore, men who displayed low altruism, but high resource potential were rated as less desirable compared to men who

displayed high altruism and low resource potential, thus showing altruism is highly valued in female mate choice. Both studies show the important of altruism in female mate choice when examining the desirability of altruism alongside other important traits in mate choice. They further show that altruism is desirable to women because it signals good parent/partner qualities as opposed to the good gene hypothesis.

Recent research by Bhogal et al. (2020) has shown that altruism as a single act is not solely desirable in female mate choice. They provided evidence across three experiments that female attraction to altruism varies according to the cost of the altruistic act. For example, they found that moderate levels of altruism were more attractive to women compared to high levels of altruism. This research shows that the cost of altruism is more important than the altruistic act itself.

Altruism is not necessarily universally attractive to women. Cultural influences can influence the role of altruism in female mate choice. For example, in Chinese students, men were attracted to altruistic women regardless of whether they were seeking a short-term or long-term relationship, and in turn, women advertise themselves as altruistic (Guo et al., 2017). This research suggests there may be cultural differences in preferences for altruism in mate choice, and presently, most research into the role of altruism in female mate choice has been conducted using WEIRD samples. Yama (2018) suggest there are differences in the values placed on altruism between individualistic and collectivist cultures. Therefore, more cross-cultural research is needed to further examine the role of altruism in female mate choice.

Although this entry focuses on altruism and female mate choice, it is important to note that prosocial traits such as heroism (Kelly & Dunbar, 2001; Margana et al., 2019) and trustworthiness (Ehlebracht et al., 2018) have been found to be attractive to women in a similar vein to altruism. Future research should unpack altruism and prosociality in female mate choice. To conceptualise the different explanations for the evolution of altruism, it is important to assess why prosocial tendencies appear to be so important in mate choice. Perhaps research should explore the costs related to the altruistic acts being displayed.

Researchers are now examining how altruism manifests into various forms of applied prosocial behaviour. For example, research has recently shown that females are attracted to altruistic acts in the form of pro-environmental behaviour, which is an advancement in the study of altruism and mate choice (Farrelly & Bhogal, 2021). In addition, Palomo-Vélez et al. (2021) examined the role of green purchases on romantic desirability. They found that buying green products is desirable due to costly signalling, consistent with previous research supporting the view that an altruistic nature is an important signal of good partner and parenting qualities.

There are limitations to note in the research examining the role of altruism in mate choice. Much of the literature presents participants with hypothetical scenarios and vignettes to examine mate preferences for altruistic mates. A limitation of using vignettes is that they can encompass attributes besides altruism, such as heroism or trustworthiness (Farrelly et al., 2016). As a result, future research should examine the role of altruism in female mate choice using more robust or real-world experimental paradigms.

In summary, the field of sexual psychology and behavior has consistently shown that altruism is a desirable trait in mate choice, which has evolved through sexual selection. Although not the focus of this entry, this consistent finding is further supported by the plethora of research that has shown men to be more altruistic in the presence of attractive women and increase their generosity through competitive altruism when in the presence of other men (See Bhogal et al., 2019 for a review).

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