



Should I Stay or Should I Go? Behavioral Acts That Negatively Affect Relationships' Prospects

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Abstract

Intimate relationships are not easy to keep as the high rates of divorce and singlehood testify. The current research aimed to examine the behavioral acts which are likely to have a negative effect on people's willingness to continue an intimate relationship. More specifically, by using qualitative research methods on a sample of 269 Greek-speaking participants, Study 1 identified 88 acts that have a negative impact on people's willingness to continue an intimate relationship. Study 2 employed quantitative research methods on a sample of 536 Greek speaking participants, and classified these acts into six broader factors. The one with the most negative impact was rated to be the "Does not care about me," followed by the "Does not treat well our children," and the "Tries to control me." Women and single participants rated the identified factors more negatively than men and participants who were in a relationship or married. Significant main effects of age, sex, relationship status and having children were also found for several factors.

Keywords

intimate relationships, conflict between the sexes, mating, relationship prospects

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Introduction

Intimate relationships are inherently difficult as they involve two parties who frequently have diverging interests (Buss, 1989; Shackelford & Goetz, 2012). For instance, a study which employed Chinese and Greek samples, found that, about one third of the participants, faced difficulties in keeping an intimate relationship (Apostolou & Wang, 2019). These difficulties are also reflected in the increasing rates of divorce. For example, it has been estimated that about one in two marriages in the USA fail (Cherlin, 2009; Raley & Bumpass, 2003; Schoen & Standish, 2001). According to the Eurostat, in the European Union countries, the divorce rate has increased from 0.8 per 1,000 persons in 1964 to 1.6 in 2020 (https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Marriage_and_divorce_statistics). According to OECD (Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development), similar trends have been observed in Asian countries (<https://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/sites/e54dd7c6-en/index.html?itemId=/content/component/e54dd7c6-en>).

Relationship fragility raises the question what behavioral acts have a negative effect on individuals' willingness to continue the relationship with those who perform them. The purpose of the

current research is to attempt address this question. Doing so requires understanding why people form long-term intimate relationships in the first place, which will be examined next.

The Evolutionary Roots of Relationship Strain Why People Form Long-term Intimate Relationships

Children require considerable, prolonged and reliable parental investment in order to reach sexual maturity (Hrdy, 2009; Lancaster & Lancaster, 1987). It is difficult for one parent to provide such investment, especially in ancestral human societies, where there were not state-based social protection systems. In addition, the lack of such systems indicated that, in order to receive support and protection, especially in times

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of need, our ancestors had to rely on others, including their intimate partners. These two facts have favored the evolution of a long-term mating strategy (strategy in the sense that individuals allocate their limited resources in achieving specific mating goals; see Gangestad & Simpson, 2000); that is, people are looking to attract and retain long-term partners usually for the purpose of having a family (Apostolou, 2021). Forming long-term intimate relationships constitutes a human universal, which is manifested in the institution of marriage. Across all historical and contemporary societies, most people eventually get married and have children (Coontz, 2006).

In the above theoretical framework, the ultimate reason for forming long-term intimate relationships is to have mates who would provide considerable, reliable and prolonged support to their partners and their children (Apostolou, 2021). Individuals who adopt a long-term mating strategy and stay in relationships with partners who cannot or are unwilling to do so, risk suffering considerable reproductive and survival costs (Gangestad & Simpson, 2000). These costs would translate into selection forces favoring the evolution of mechanisms such as emotions (see Tooby & Cosmides, 2008) that would allow individuals to monitor their partners' behavior, and assess their commitment to the relationship and their capacity to provide reliably for them and their children. It follows that, behavioral acts that indicate a reduced commitment to the relationship as well as a reduced capacity to reliably provide for one's partner and children, will have a negative effect on people (e.g., triggering negative emotions such as anger and disappointment), motivating them to reassess their relationship's prospects. We will examine such acts next.

Acts that Compromise Relationships' Prospects

One reason behind reduced commitment, is partners not adopting a long-term mating strategy. More specifically, some people adopt a short-term mating strategy that is, they form only short-term intimate relationships. People also adopt a transitory mating strategy that is, they form intimate relationships with the purpose of achieving an instrumental goal other than staying with the current partner in the long-run (Apostolou, 2017, 2021). Reduced commitment to a relationship may also arise from a divergence in mate value. For instance, one party may experience an increase in its mate value by securing for instance a better job. The now higher mate value partner, would be in a position to attract mates of also higher mate value than the one they currently have. That is, they would experience an opportunity cost, namely the benefits that they could obtain by attracting a higher mate value partner and they do not by staying with their current one. This opportunity cost, would turn them less committed to the current relationship. Overall, behavioral acts indicating lack of commitment to a partner and the current relationship, will negatively affect individuals in considering terminating an intimate relationship.

Commitment to a relationship and the capacity to provide for one's family, can also be compromised by partners adopting an extra-pair mating strategy that is, they have casual extra-pair relationships. For instance, about one in three married men

and about one in five married women in the U.S., are expected to have an extramarital affair during their lifetime (Laumann et al., 1994; Tafoya & Spitzberg, 2007). Evidence from a French study indicated that, in the course of their lives, one in three women had sexual intercourse with someone other than their legitimate partner (IFOP, 2017). Extra-pair relationships are harmful for the legitimate partners, as they risk losing their partners to competitors or losing their partners' investment to others, and for men in particular, raising other men's children without being aware of it (Buss, 2000; Buss & Schmitt, 1993). It follows that, behavioral acts which indicate or hint the adoption of an extra-pair mating strategy, would compromise a partner's willingness to stay in the relationship.

Furthermore, the capacity to provide support and resources to one's family would be compromised by individuals having traits such as low empathy, meanness, and high aggression that can lead them to act abusively on their partners and children. Such traits have been selected because, at least in ancestral environments, would give benefits to individuals which exceed the costs in their intimate relationships (see Buss & Duntley, 2006). For instance, a low threshold of jealousy could motivate physical or non-physical punishment that would deter culprits from future infidelity (Buss, 2000). Although abusive behavior can in some instances enable individuals to promote their fitness goals, it almost always harmful to the fitness of the victims. For example, an aggressive husband may physically harm or even kill his wife (Buss, 2021; Daly & Wilson, 1988). Accordingly, behavioral acts that indicate having traits that would lead to physical harm, would reduce willingness to continue the relationship. Moving on, intimate partners may have traits such as laziness and stinginess, which compromise their capacity to provide resources. In effect, behavioral acts which indicate that partners have traits associated with a reduced capacity to provide resources, would decrease people's willingness to continue an intimate relationship.

Overall, we hypothesize that behavioral acts that indicated a reduced commitment to the relationship and a reduced capacity to provide support and resources to one's family, would negatively affect individuals' willingness to continue the relationship with them. We predict that such acts would involve indicating indifference to a partner, the adoption of an extra-pair mating strategy, having abusive personality, and traits that are associated with reduced capacity to provide resources. The existing literature provides some support for these predictions.

Current Literature

In the investment model of commitment (Rusbult, 1980, 1983), relationships persist not only because of the positive qualities that attract partners to one another (their satisfaction), but also because of the ties that bind partners to each other (their investments), and the absence of a better option beyond the relationship with the current partner (lack of alternatives). Consistent with this argument, Le and Agnew (2003) performed a meta-analysis, and found that satisfaction with, alternatives to, and investments in a relationship, each correlated significantly with commitment to that relationship, which, in turn, was a significant predictor of relationship breakup.

A number of studies have attempted to identify the predictors of relationship satisfaction, which is a predictor of a relationship's prospects (Rusbult & Zembrodt, 1983). Leone and Hall (2003) examined the relationship between self-monitoring (i.e., dispositional differences in the ability and motivation to modulate displays of affect, nonverbal behavior, and other forms of self-presentation) and marriage satisfaction. In a sample of 117 married participants, they found that the majority of satisfied spouses were low self-monitors, while the majority of dissatisfied spouses were high self-monitors. Another study found that insecure attachment was associated with sexual dissatisfaction, with inhibited communication of sexual needs having a mediating role (Davis et al., 2006). Moreover, Sanford (2010) found that perceiving one's partner as both controlling and neglectful had a negative effect on relationship satisfaction. Another study investigated whether partners' frustration of relational needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness was associated with relationship dissatisfaction and conflict (Vanhee et al., 2018). It was found that need frustration was associated with how dissatisfied partners were with their relationship, how frequently they initiated conflict, and how they communicated during conflicts. In addition, both one's own and one's partner's need frustration played a role in dissatisfaction and conflict. Arikewuyo et al. (2021) investigated the extent to which low self-esteem, relationship dissatisfaction, and relationship insecurity exacerbate intention to terminate a romantic relationship. They found that low self-esteem contributed to people having negative thoughts, emotions, and evaluation of their romantic relationships.

One recent study on romantic relationship quality (i.e., a person's subjective perception that their relationship is relatively good versus bad), examined 43 dyadic longitudinal datasets and found that, perceived-partner commitment and intimate partner violence, were important predictors of relationship quality (Joel et al., 2020 see also Fletcher et al., 2000). Moreover, there have been some recent attempts to examine the sources of relationship strain. In particular, Apostolou and Wang (2020) identified 78 possible difficulties in keeping an intimate relationship. In a subsequent research, they asked 1,403 participants from China and Greece who were in an intimate relationship to rate how much strain each difficulty caused them in their relationship, and based on their responses, they classified the 78 difficulties into 13 broader factors (Apostolou & Wang, 2021). These factors included character issues, lack of effort from the partner to keep the relationship, violence, and infidelity.

Behavioral acts that have a negative effect on relationships' prospects, are likely to lead married individuals to divorce. Accordingly, causes of divorce can be revealing about these acts.

Studies indicate that domestic violence, infidelity, weak commitment to marriage, and low capacity to provide resources, are important predictors of divorce (Clements et al., 2004; DeMaris, 2000; Gottman & Levenson, 2000; Kurdek, 2002; Lawrence & Bradbury, 2001; Orbuch et al., 2002). For instance, Bloom et al. (1985) employed a sample of 153 newly separated individuals in the USA, and identified physical abuse to be one cause of marital dissatisfaction,

albeit not the most common one. Amato and Previti (2003) analyzed the interviews of 208 divorced individuals in the USA, and found that infidelity was the most commonly reported cause of marital dissolution. Another study, employed a sample of 886 divorcing parents in the United States, and found that not enough attention from the spouse was a common reason for divorce (Hawkins et al., 2012). A different study, employed a sample of 515 Greek-speaking participants, and found that, people would consider divorce if their partners were abusive, over-absorbed in their careers, have lost their jobs and were not making enough money to support the household (Apostolou et al., 2019). Betzig (1989) examined the causes of divorce in a sample of 186 preindustrial societies. She found that among the most common ones were infidelity, cruelty or maltreatment, laziness and inadequate support.

The Present Study

Although the existing literature offers support for the predictions derived from the evolutionary theoretical framework, to the best of our knowledge, there has not been any study which has attempted to examine directly what behavioral acts can negatively affect people's willingness to continue an intimate relationship, which is the purpose of the current work. More specifically, the present study aimed to contribute to the existing literature by planning specifically to identify the behavioral acts which are likely to have a negative impact on people's willingness to continue an intimate relationship (Study 1), and to classify them into broader behavioral categories (Study 2). It aimed further to test the hypothesis that these categories would reflect extra-pair mating, reduced commitment to the relationship, reduced capacity to provide resources, and abusive behavior.

Furthermore, men are on average physically stronger than women (Lassek & Gaulin, 2009). It follows that, *ceteris paribus*, an abusive male partner could cause more physical harm to his female partner than the other way round. Accordingly, we predict that women would be more negatively affected by their partners acting abusively than men. In addition, having children can affect how people assess their relationship's prospects. As children require considerable investment from both parents, people's willingness to continue an intimate relationship would be less affected by their partners' acts, so that their children continue receiving support from both parents. Overall, we aimed further to examine the effects of sex and children on the negative impact that behavioral acts would have on individuals' willingness to continue a relationship. We would also examine the effects of age and relationship status, without making directional hypotheses.

Study I

Method

Participants. The study was designed and executed at a private university situated in the Republic of Cyprus, and it was approved by the institution's ethics committee. Participation

Table 1. The Acts that Reduce Willingness to Continue a Relationship Identified in Study 1 and their Classification into Broader Categories in Study 2.

Factors Acts	Factor loadings	Cronbach's α
Tries to control me		.98
He/she is trying to control me	.655	
He/she is pushy	.627	
He/she imposes things and situations on me	.558	
He/she restricts my freedom	.477	
He/she is manipulative	.471	
He/she blames me when something goes wrong	.448	
He/she is always complaining	.442	
He/she pushes me to make decisions while I am not ready and confident	.433	
He/she constantly criticize me	.423	
He/she tries indirectly or directly to cut me off from my interests	.412	
He/she is too jealous	.410	
He/she constantly creates tensions	.409	
He/she makes scenes of jealousy	.398	
He/she offends me	.394	
He/she underestimates me	.382	
He/she takes initiatives for things that involve me without asking me	.368	
He/she does not respect my space	.361	
He/she is absolute in his / her views	.308	
He/she is competitive with me	.298	
Does not care about me		.98
He/she neglects me	.733	
He/she stops showing interest in me	.716	
He/she shows no interest in my feelings	.705	
He/she does not pay any attention to me	.703	
He/she shows no interest in our relationship	.676	
He/she does not have time for me	.671	
I am not his/her first priority	.671	
He/she is distant	.651	
He/she does not do things for me	.647	
He/she does not take me into consideration	.643	
He/she ignores me	.613	
He/she does not try to understand me	.610	
He/she does not discuss his/her problems with me	.604	
I am not part of his/her plans	.603	
He/she does not respect my needs	.596	
He/she does not appreciate the things I do for our relationship	.569	
He makes me feel unattractive	.558	
He/she does not support me in difficult times	.534	
He/she does not care about me	.521	
He/she does not recognize the things I do for him/her	.517	
He/she shows no sexual interest in me	.510	
He/she closes to himself/herself	.509	
He/she takes me for granted	.494	
He/she does not respect me	.450	
He/she does not take my opinion into consideration	.448	
He/she does not support my choices	.428	
He/she does not respect my views	.409	
He/she does not care about things that interest me	.396	
He/she finds excuses for not having sex	.396	
He/she is selfish	.371	
He/she does not assume his / her responsibilities	.366	
He/she has a strongly narcissistic attitude	.300	
He/she does things without informing me	.292	

(continued)

Table 1. Continued.

Factors	Factor loadings	Cronbach's α
Acts		
Exhibits abusive behavior		.95
He/she curses a lot	.700	
He/she is irritable	.687	
He/she yells at me	.516	
He/she is rough	.505	
He/she abuses substances (e.g., alcohol, tobacco etc.)	.430	
He/she is arrogant	.403	
He/she speaks badly to me	.393	
He/she always whining	.371	
He/she has negativity	.349	
He/she has inappropriate behavior in social circumstances	.295	
He/she treats me badly	.288	
Shows interest in other men/women		.95
He is talking to his / her ex	.955	
Flirts with other men / women	.940	
Shows interest in other men / women	.842	
Constantly refers to his / her ex	.714	
He/she is cheating on me	.687	
Compares me to his / her ex	.556	
He/she has secrets from me	.507	
He/she lies	.435	
He/she does things that he/she knows are bothering me	.294	
Has undesirable traits		.88
He/she stops taking care of himself / herself	.577	
He/she has put on weight	.541	
He/she does not take initiatives	.421	
He/she is lazy	.373	
He/she is never happy with anything	.350	
He/she never does things I ask for	.331	
He/she is stingy	.324	
He does not think about our spending	.307	
He/she is attached to his / her parents	.243	
Does not treat well our children		.97
He/she does not treat our children well	-.513	
He/she is physically abusing me	-.498	
He/she does not take enough care of our children	-.437	
He does not spend enough time with our children	-.364	
He/she makes me feel small in front of other	-.332	
He/she is taking advantage of me financially	-.307	
He/she does not have appropriate parental behavior	-.286	

was on voluntary basis, and participants were recruited by advertising the study on social media, including Facebook and Instagram, and by forwarding it to students and colleagues. In order to take part, individuals had to be at least 18 years old.

The original sample consisted of 269 participants. However, in order to increase validity, we excluded individuals who had no relationship experience that is, those who indicated that they were currently single and that they had never been in an intimate relationship before. Thus, our sample consisted of 233 Greek-speaking participants (132 women, 101 men), who had some relationship experience. The mean age of women was 30.2 ($SD=10.3$), and the mean age of men was 32.1 ($SD=12.0$). Moreover, 39.1% of the participants indicated that they

were in a relationship, 27.2% single, 26.4% married, and 7.3% chose the "other" option.

Materials. The survey was in Greek, run online and consisted of two parts. In the first part, participants were asked the following: "Please indicate some things your partner is likely to do which would negatively affect your willingness to stay in relationship with him/her," and they were provided with space to record their responses. In the second part, demographic information was collected, including sex, age, relationship status, and relationship experience. With respect to the latter, the participants were asked if they had been in the past in an intimate relationship (Yes/No).

Analysis and results. In order to analyze the data from the open-ended questionnaires, we recruited a male and a female graduate student. The assistants were asked to go through the responses, and prepare a list of acts that would have a negative effect on relationship's prospects. They were instructed to eliminate answers with unclear or vague wording. After processing about 30% of the responses, the assistants discussed their respective lists of acts, and then moved on to process the remaining responses. Each assistant produced a list of acts, and subsequently, they compared their respective lists. The assistants agreed on most of the items. In cases where there was no complete overlap, the authors were consulted, and eventually, all the parties agreed to a final list of acts. In total, 88 acts that could negative impact on the willingness to continue the relationship were identified, and were listed in Table 1.

Study 2

Method

Participants. Participants were recruited following the procedure discussed in Study 1. The original sample included 587 participants however, we excluded the ones who had no relationship experience. Thus, for our analysis, we employed a sample of 536 Greek-speaking individuals (321 women, 214 men, and one participant who did not indicate her/his sex) took part. The mean age of women was 29.9 ($SD = 10.5$), and the mean age of men was 35.5 ($SD = 12.1$). With respect to the relationship status, 40.3% of the participants indicated that they were in a relationship, 36.6% were single, 17.7% married, and 5.4% chose the "other" option. In addition, 28.1% of the participants indicated that they had children.

Materials. The survey was in Greek, run online, was designed using Google Forms, and consisted of two parts. In the first part, participants were given the following scenario: "You can find below some things your current or future partner might do. Indicate to what extent they would negatively affect your willingness to continue your relationship with him/her." Subsequently, they were given the 88 acts identified in Study 1, to rate in the following five-point Likert scale: 1 – Not at all likely, 5 – Very much likely. In the second part,

demographic information was collected, including sex, age, relationship status, children and relationship experience. The order of presentation of the questions in each part was randomized across participants.

Data analysis. In order to classify the 88 acts identified in Study 1 into broader categories, we applied principal axis factoring using the direct oblimin as the rotation method. We employed this instead of other factor extraction methods such as principal components analysis, because we have hypothesized that there were latent constructs influencing how people rated the specific behavioral acts. In order to decide how many factor to keep, we employed the Kaiser criterion, that is, we retained all factors with an eigenvalue equal or higher to one. In order to identify significant effects, we performed a series of MANCOVA tests on each extracted factor. More specifically, the items that loaded to a given factor were entered as the dependent variables, the sex, relationship status and children were entered as the categorical independent variables, and the age as the continuous independent variable.

Results

Factor Structure

Overall, we extracted six factors which were presented in Table 1. Cumulatively, these factors explained 72.9% of the variance. Internal consistency ranged from .88 to .98 (Table 1). The first factor to emerge was the "Tries to control me," where acts aiming to reduce a partner's freedom, and impose one's will, possibly by using manipulation, would negatively affect participants' willingness to continue a relationship. One facet of this factor, involved the partner being too jealous and frequently making scenes of jealousy. In the "Does not care about me" factor, individuals would be negatively affected by acts indicating indifference, including neglecting, not showing interest, not having time, ignoring and being distant from a partner. In the "Exhibits abusive behavior" factor, participants were put off by their partners being abusive, rough, irritable, yelling at them, and treating them badly.

Moreover, in the "Shows interest in other men/women," participants were negatively affected by their partners exhibiting interest in others by flirting with other men/women, talking to

Table 2. Mean Scores and Main Effects in Study 2.

Factors	Overall	Above "4"	Women	Men	Sex		Age		Relationship status		Children	
	Mean (SD)	%	Mean (SD)	Mean (SD)	p-value	η_p^2	p-value	η_p^2	p-value	η_p^2	p-value	η_p^2
Does not care about me	3.85 (1.06)	57.1	3.97 (1.06)	3.68 (1.04)	<.001	.183	.158	.089	<.001	.119	.004	.123
Does not treat well our children	3.78 (1.44)	65.3	3.98 (1.38)	3.48 (1.47)	.002	.046	.096	.026	.047	.023	.841	.007
Tries to control me	3.75 (1.18)	59.2	3.88 (1.20)	3.56 (1.13)	.001	.092	(+) <.001	.098	.318	.043	.004	.081
Shows interest in other men/women	3.75 (1.22)	57.7	3.89 (1.19)	3.55 (1.23)	.081	.032	.118	.029	.225	.022	.149	.028
Exhibits abusive behavior	3.62 (1.16)	50.3	3.79 (1.12)	3.37 (1.17)	.006	.054	(+) <.001	.072	.007	.039	.740	.016
Has undesirable traits	3.21 (0.96)	23.5	3.36 (0.95)	2.98 (0.94)	<.001	.070	(+) <.001	.061	<.001	.044	.073	.033

Note. The signs in parenthesis indicate the direction of the relationship.

their past girlfriends/boyfriends, or actually cheating on them. In the “Has undesirable traits” factor, participants were put off by their partners stop taking care of themselves, being lazy, not taking initiatives, never being happy with anything, and being stingy. Furthermore, in the “Does not treat well our children” factor, participants indicated that their relationship’s prospects would be negatively affected by their partners mistreating their children, and not spending enough time with them. Partners being physically abusive and taking advantage of their partners financially, were facets of this factor.

Importance of Factors

Moving on, we calculated the means and standard deviations for each factor, and we placed them in a hierarchical order in Table 2. At the top of the hierarchy, was the “Does not care about me,” followed by the “Does not treat well our children,” and the “Tries to control me” factors. We should note however that all the means were close to each other. Moreover, for each factor, we calculated the percentage of participants who had a mean score of four or more. Given our scale, these percentages would tell us, for how many participants each factor had high negative impact. The highest percentage was for the “Does not treat well our children,” followed by the “Tries to control me” and the “Does not care about me” factors (Table 2).

Significant Effects

As we can see from Table 2, significant sex differences were found in five out of six factors, with women giving higher scores than men. As indicated by the effect size, the largest sex difference was over the “Does not care about me,” followed by the “Tries to control me,” and the “Has undesirable traits” factors. Moreover, significant main effects of age were found for three factors, the largest one being over the “Tries to control me.” In all cases, the regression coefficient of age was positive, indicating that older tended to give higher scores than younger participants. Relationship status was significant in three factors. In all cases, single participants gave higher scores than participants who were in a relationship or married.

In addition, there was a significant main effect of the children variable on the “Tries to control me” factor. In particular, participants who did not have children gave higher scores ($M=3.81$, $SD=1.20$) than participants who had children ($M=3.58$, $SD=1.12$). Furthermore, there was a significant main effect of the children variable on the “Does not care about me” factor. As before, participants who did not have children gave higher scores ($M=3.90$, $SD=1.07$) than participants who had children ($M=3.71$, $SD=1.03$).

Discussion

In the current research, we have identified 88 acts that can negatively affect individuals’ willingness to continue an intimate relationship, and we have classified them into six broader factors. The one with the highest negative impact was the

“Does not care about me,” followed by the “Does not treat well our children,” and the “Tries to control me.” Moreover, we have found that women and single participants rated the identified factors more negatively than men and participants who were in a relationship or married. In addition, for several factors, we have identified significant main effects of age and having children.

In the evolutionary theoretical framework, people have evolved adaptations such as emotions that would enable them to form long-lasting intimate relationships with individuals who would reliably provide long-term support to their partners and their children. These adaptations, would trigger when intimate partners exhibit behaviors which indicate that they do not satisfy these conditions, making individuals less willing to continue their relationship with them. In particular, we have argued that such acts would reflect reduced commitment, reduced capacity to provide resources, infidelity and abusive behavior.

Consistent with our original prediction, the “Does not care about me” factor emerged, where participants indicated that intimate partners behaving in a way that indicated that they were not committed to the relationship, would negatively affect their willingness to continue being with them. This factor was rated to have the strongest negative effect, which is not surprising because the capacity to provide support and resources becomes irrelevant if partners are not committed to the relationship. Also consistent with our original prediction, the “Shows interest in other men/women” factor emerged, where participants were negatively affected by their partners’ interest in other men or women. This factor is compromising to the relationship’s prospects, as it involves partners adopting an extra-pair strategy. It is also compromising because it involves reduced commitment to the relationship that is, partners exhibiting interest in other men or women may indicate that they have mate-switching in mind (see Buss et al., 2017).

Moving on, as we originally predicted, the “Exhibits abusive behavior” factor emerged, where a partner being abusive would be detrimental to the relationship’s prospects. Note however that the “He/she is physically abusing me” act, did not load here but to the “Does not treat well our children” factor. One possible interpretation of this finding is that, people worry more about an abusing partner physically harming their children, who are more vulnerable than them. Furthermore, as we originally predicted, the “Has undesirable traits” factor emerged, where participants indicated that traits such as being lazy, which are associated with resource provision capacity, would negatively affect a relationship’s prospects. The “He/she stops taking care of himself / herself” and the “He/she has put on weight” acts, also loaded in this factor. These acts may reflect low conscientiousness, which in turn, is associated with lower resource provision capacity and poorer quality of intimate relationships (Matthews et al., 2015). People who score low in conscientiousness tend to be unreliable, which can compromise their capacity to provide resources reliably. These acts may also reflect a decrease in a partner’s mate value. More specifically, good looks are highly valued in a mate (Thomas et al., 2020) thus, deterioration in this domain

by one partner would lead to a discrepancy in mate value, leading to decrease commitment by the other partner.

In the proposed theoretical framework, the primary ultimate reason for having a long-term intimate relationship is to have and raise children, and any acts that indicate that partners are not a good fit for this purpose, would negatively affect willingness to stay with them. Thus, although we did not specifically predict it, the “Does not treat well our children” factor emerged, where participants indicated that they would consider terminating a relationship if their partners mistreated their children. Given the evolutionary significance of having children, it is not surprise that this factor was rated second in how strong negative effect would have on a relationship’s prospects.

We did not predict the emergence of the “Tries to control me” factor, where participants indicated that they would be negatively affected by their partners trying to control them and restrict their freedom. Previous research has also found that such attempts constitute a source of relationship strain (Apostolou & Wang, 2020, 2021). One possibility is that, an over-controlling partner can harm individuals’ own capacity to generate resources, and thus, to support themselves and their children. For instance, people may face difficulties going out to business dinners or trips, which could be detrimental for their careers. Acts indicating a low threshold of jealousy such as “He/she is too jealous” and “He/she makes scenes of jealousy” also loaded here. High jealousy is associated with increased probability to abuse a partner (Buss, 2000). This being the case, participants may be negatively affected by this factor because it compromises their capacity to provide support for their family. In addition, following the Self-Determination Theory, people have three universal psychological needs, essential for their physical and psychological well-being, namely the need for autonomy, competence and relatedness (Chen et al., 2015; Deci & Ryan, 2000). The “Tries to control me” factor reduces autonomy, which in turn, affects well-being and the willingness to continue the relationship.

Our prediction that abusive behavior would affect more women’s willingness to continue the relationship was confirmed, as such sex difference was found in the “Exhibits abusive behavior” and the “Does not treat well our children” factors. However, this effect was part of a general trend of women giving higher scores than men. One reason could be that women are more selective than men over whom they will continue be with. In addition, as indicated by the effect size, the largest sex difference was over the “Does not care about me” factor. One explanation can be that men are more prone than women to adopt a short-term mating strategy (Buss & Schmitt, 1993; Gangestad & Simpson, 2000), which can turn women more sensitive to behaviors that indicate lack of commitment. The second largest difference was over the “Tries to control me” factor. A possible explanation can be that the risk of cuckoldry turns infidelity more costly for men, who are then more likely to attempt to control their partners’ behavior, turning women more sensitive to these attempts.

For half of the factors, we found significant age effects, with older giving higher scores than younger participants. This

finding could indicate that people become more selective as they age. Furthermore, we found that single individuals indicated that the identified factors were more likely to negatively affect their willingness to continue an intimate relationship, than individuals who were in a relationship or married. One possible reason is that, individuals who are in an intimate relationship, have invest in it, so they would discount any behavioral acts by the amount of investment they would forgo if they were to terminate it. For single individuals, this amount is zero, resulting in higher willingness to terminate a hypothetical relationship. Another contributing factor can be that, people who have a low threshold of tolerating negative behavioral acts from their intimate partners, are more likely to be single. Future research needs to attempt to distinguish between the two effects.

Moving on, our prediction that the identified factors would affect less individuals who had children, was partially confirmed as such an effect was found only for the “Tries to control me” and the “Does not care about me” factors. One reason why such effect was not found in all factors can be that it was negated by an opposite effect, namely that people with children’s willingness to continue a relationship was affected more by the identified factors, because they indicate that their partners have a reduced capacity to support a family. Future research needs to investigate further the impact of having children on predicting the negative effects of different behavioral acts on people’s willingness to continue an intimate relationship.

Such future research could involve longitudinal studies that would aim to examine the extent to which the identified factors predict relationship breakup over time. In addition, the impact of the identified factors on relationship stability would be moderated by cultural and environmental factors. For instance, cultures vary in the tolerance of physical and verbal abuse within the context of a relationship, and these differences may cause differences in the impact of the “Exhibits abusive behavior” factor on relationships’ prospects. Accordingly, future cross-cultural research can focus on identifying cultural variables which moderate the impact of the identified factors on relationships’ prospects (see also Burtăverde & Ene, 2021). Moreover, we expect that the effect of the identified variables would be moderated by several individual differences. For example, people who value high their independence, would be more affected by their partners trying to control them than people who value their independence less. Thus, future research needs to extend our work by examining the moderating effects of variables capturing individual differences on the impact of the six factors on relationships’ prospects.

One recent study employed a sample of 6,273 Greek-speaking participants, and found that, about 83%, indicated that they wanted initially or eventually to have a relationships that last a lifetime (Apostolou, 2021). Such findings indicate that the increasing fragility of intimate relationships is not due to people not wanting to have long-lasting intimate relationships, but due to having difficulties keeping one (see also Apostolou & Wang, 2019). The current study has managed to identify several acts which are likely to negatively affect relationships’ prospects. These findings

have important practical implications, as they can enable individuals to improve their intimate relationships by identifying acts in their behavior which negatively affect their relationship with their partners. Similarly, these findings could be of use to clinical and counseling psychologists in developing interventions that aim to alter behavioral acts that negatively affect intimate relationships, helping their clients to have healthier and longer-lasting relationships.

One limitation of the current research is that it was based on self-report instruments, which are subject to biases, including participants giving inaccurate answers. Moreover, there are several factors which are likely to predict the negative impact of the extracted factors on the willingness to continue a relationship such as personality, financial status, and mate value that the current study did not measure. Moreover, one study is not sufficient for ensuring that the observed is also the actual factor structure. Thus, replication studies are necessary for better understanding the factor structure of the behavioral acts that negatively affect relationships' prospects. These studies could also assess convergent and divergent validity by adding variables which are predicted to have negative or positive associations with the extracted factors.

Furthermore, the present study was confined to the Greek cultural context, and future research needs to attempt to replicate its findings in other cultural contexts. In addition, it did not identify the causal chain between the identified factors and the decrease in the willingness to continue the relationship. We hypothesized that this chain would involve emotions; for instance, acts that indicate lack of interest would trigger sadness and disappointment, which in turn, would reduce willingness to continue the relationship with a current partner. Future research needs to test this hypothesis.

People frequently behave in a way that negatively affects their partners' willingness to continue the relationship with them. The current study identified several acts which have such a negative effect. Nevertheless, considerable more research is required in order to have a more inclusive understanding of the factors that impact relationships' prospects.

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