



Breadwinner Seeks Bottle Warmer: How Women’s Future Aspirations and Expectations Predict Their Current Mate Preferences

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Abstract

Contemporary women in Western cultures are often trying to juggle careers alongside personal and societal expectations for childrearing in an effort to “have it all.” We examine the effects of this balancing act on heterosexual women’s mate selection motivations. Across three Canadian samples ($n = 360$), we tested concurrent hypotheses about the desirability of both similar and complementary characteristics in a potential mate. Specifically, women’s aspirations (to prioritize career over family) and their expectations for the roles they will most likely adopt within their future partnerships (primary breadwinner and/or caregiver) were tested as key predictors of mate preferences. Although specific effects varied across samples, a mega-analysis of the combined sample and an internal meta-analysis of effect sizes from the three studies provided support for both complementary and similarity motives (controlling for gender role attitudes). Women’s aspirations to prioritize career (over family) predicted greater similarity in mate preferences, such that they placed less importance on men’s parenting qualities, more importance on their access to financial resources, and preferred a career-oriented over family-oriented exemplar. However, women’s expectations of actually taking on the breadwinner role predicted greater complementarity in mate preferences (greater desirability of parenting qualities and a family-oriented partner; with financial resources rated as less important). Our work expands current understanding of women’s decision-making processes when selecting a mate and has implications for men’s changing traits and roles.

Keywords Gender roles · Mate preferences · Communal · Agentic · Expectations · Aspirations

Selecting a person with whom to share one’s life is among the most important decisions a person can make. For heterosexual professional women in Western cultures, who are often trying to juggle career goals alongside personal and societal expectations for childrearing, mate selection can affect their ability to “have it all.” The current research sought to better understand how heterosexual women’s traditional gender role attitudes, career aspirations, and role expectations predict their evaluations of potential long-term mates, especially those most likely to share in, and thus reduce the burden of,

parenting responsibilities. Recognizing that women are likely to be initially attracted to men who seem to share similar goals, values, and aspirations to prioritize career over family (or vice versa), we asked whether their mate preferences are simultaneously predicted by seeking a partner with complementary role expectations, given the dyadic nature of romantic partnerships. Therefore, we tested a model of heterosexual women’s mate preferences that simultaneously included their personal aspirations to prioritize career versus family and their expected roles within a future partnership (i.e., primary breadwinner and primary caregiver), controlling for their traditional attitudes toward gender roles.

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Similarity and Complementarity in Mate Preferences

Prior research on romantic attraction points to a motivation to seek a mate who falls within an acceptable range of similarity to oneself (Acitelli et al. 2001). People are often most attracted to others who share their core beliefs and values (Kalmijn

1994, 1998; Mare 1991). There is also evidence of preferences for mates with similar personality traits. For instance, people who are dispositionally inclined toward parental caregiving also more strongly prefer mates with caregiving attributes (Buckels et al. 2015). But there is also research indicating that people are sensitive to the ways in which their partner can complement their personal attributes (Aron et al. 1991). For example, evolutionary approaches to mate selection suggest that sex differences in mate preferences—such as the finding that women show a relatively greater preference for mates who have access to financial resources—may reflect distinct, complementary contributions to offspring care (Buss and Schmitt 1993; Li et al. 2011).

In modern societies, mate preferences—including preferences for mates with similar versus complementary attributes—are likely to reflect modern circumstances. Among those modern circumstances are loosened constraints on gender roles. The last century has seen an unprecedented expansion in the types of gender roles that are considered acceptable for women (Eagly 1987, 2013) and, to a lesser extent, for men (Block et al. 2019, 2018; Croft et al. 2015). As many women increasingly enter and excel in the same domains as men, to what degree are their expectations for changing gender roles and greater independence from men for financial (if not physical) security matched by a weakening attraction to career-oriented, resource-rich men and a stronger attraction to family-oriented, caregiving men?

There is some evidence that as women increase their own levels of status and power, the qualities they value in a mate might change. For example, in countries with greater gender equality, women's relatively higher preference for agentic qualities in men (e.g., good financial prospects, high social status, ambition) is reduced (Conroy-Beam et al. 2015; Zentner and Mitura 2012). Also, in more egalitarian countries (e.g., Finland, Germany, the United States, and Italy), women are more likely than are men to indicate a preference for a mate who is a good cook and housekeeper (Zentner and Mitura 2012). A recent study of educated Belgian women also found that, in general, women tended to be more attracted to a family- rather than career-oriented mate, and women in dual-earner couples whose partners indicated a stronger family connection reported less work-family conflict and greater life satisfaction (Meeussen et al. 2018). These findings from international and cross-cultural research provide some suggestion that as cultures become more gender egalitarian, the mate preferences between men and women become less differentiated (see also Kasser and Sharma 1999; Li et al. 2011).

The purpose of the current research is to extend these findings to look more directly at the individual variation among women in their attitudes, career aspirations, and gender role expectations for their future partnerships and families. Despite providing an informative natural experiment about different cultural and social norms, cross-national studies have the

limitation that cultural variation in gender role attitudes could explain both a loosening of gender roles and changing mate preferences (i.e., a third-variable explanation). Our question is whether (within a national context), controlling for women's gender role attitudes (i.e., the aforementioned third variable measured at the individual level), are women who aspire to prioritize their career over family, or who expect to find themselves in a primary breadwinning role, especially attracted to men with the qualities of a good parent and the motivation to take an active role in childcare? Conversely, a “like attracts like” motivation might instead lead women with stronger career aspirations or breadwinning expectations to find similarly agentic, career-oriented men especially attractive (and parenting qualities less attractive). We do not suggest that these two hypotheses are mutually exclusive; rather our goal was to test the unique effects of similarity and complementary in a regression model predicting women's mate preferences from their attitudes, personal career aspirations, and dyadic role expectations, simultaneously.

Some prior evidence suggests that both women and men modify their mate preferences in light of their own expected social roles. For example, one study found that following an experimental manipulation of men's and women's imagined futures as breadwinners or homemakers, all participants (regardless of their gender) responded by increasing their interest in a romantic partner with qualities complementary to their own imagined role (Eagly et al. 2009). Other researchers have suggested that the most well-adjusted romantic couples are those paired with similar gender-related attitudes, but who engage in complementary roles and behaviors (Aube and Koestner 1995; Buckels et al. 2015). Our work extends such existing findings by taking an individual differences approach to examining naturalistic variation in how young women's anticipation of their future role within their family (e.g., as a future breadwinner) predicts their present attraction to men with similar and/or complementary attitudes and characteristics.

We were primarily interested in how these concerns affect samples of university women who expect to eventually have and raise children with a male partner, but who have not yet had to make the realistic trade-off between work versus family. We focus on more highly educated women not because working class women and men do not also struggle with balancing work and family, but because university-educated women are perhaps more likely to have opportunities to excel in higher paid, professional careers that could be curtailed by men's willingness to engage in household labor (Coltrane 2000; Croft et al. 2019). We focus on heterosexual women who plan to have a family because they are most likely to feel constrained by gender role norms between men and women.

Within this population in a North American context, we sought to examine how women's possible selves (Markus and Nurius 1986; Oyserman and James 2011) for their future gender roles relate to their mate preferences in the present.

Prior research has documented that women's and men's beliefs about gender play a role in shaping their possible selves for their future (Brown and Diekmann 2010). But distinct from their own future selves, people also hold schemas about their future romantic partners and the relationship dyad itself (Aron and Aron 1986). We suggest that these abstract cognitive representations may be informed both by a person's own career aspirations, which reflect the personal prioritization one hopes to have for one's career relative to family responsibilities, and by their role expectations of how future responsibilities will be shared with a partner, which are likely to be more dyadic in nature. The key possibility here is that even women who aspire to prioritize career over family might still expect to take on the primary caregiver role within their future family, not only to the extent that they endorse a traditional gender role ideology, but also if they anticipate that a future mate is unlikely to be willing or able to take on that role.

A complementarity hypothesis is not at odds with a similarity hypothesis, but rather these two processes might operate simultaneously to explain unique pieces of long-term mate preferences. This approach is in line with other recent close relationship research that conceptualizes romantic relationship decisions within a traditional judgment and decision-making framework (Joel et al. 2013). On the one hand, women's currently held aspirations (e.g., to prioritize their career over family) should predict their preferences for a mate with a similar worldview. On the other hand, distinct from the relative weight given to family and career is the expectation of one's role vis-à-vis one's partner. The role expectation that, within the romantic dyad, one partner will bring in more financial resources (i.e., as the primary breadwinner) is what we argue will uniquely predict attraction to a mate with complementary characteristics, such as the motivation and ability to prioritize childcare.

Thus, our research tests the concurrent hypotheses that women will be attracted to men who have similar career aspirations, while at the same time seeking complementarity for their expected roles (especially breadwinning, which is a non-traditional role for women) within the dyad. Empirically documenting the individual effects of these two motivational predictors of mate preferences will advance our current understanding of the psychological processes by which women choose long-term partners. Doing so may also have practical implications for understanding how men's increasing domestic involvement could help lift some of the constraints on women's own roles and future career pursuits (Croft et al. 2019) and changing people's attitudes about the importance of men adopting traditionally female roles and occupations (Block et al. 2019).

Overview of Studies and Analytic Strategy

In the present paper, we present results from three samples of young women, testing their mate preferences predicted by

their career aspirations (the extent that they aspire to prioritize career over family or vice versa) and future role expectations (their anticipated likelihood of becoming the primary caregiver or breadwinner in the couple), controlling for their attitudes toward gender roles more broadly. Due to our specific interest in understanding women's mate preferences in the context of current sentiments regarding "having it all," our key variables reflect these aspects of balancing work and family life within a heterosexual romantic partnership by assessing women's preferences for men who are willing to contribute to caregiving, in terms of providing financial resources as well as everyday parenting behaviors. The *similarity hypothesis* is that women's personal career aspirations will predict a desire for similarity in a mate (i.e., women who plan to prioritize career over family will be more attracted to men who appear to be more career-oriented). The *complementarity hypothesis* is that those women who expect to become the primary breadwinner in the future dyad will be especially motivated to find a mate with the qualities and motivations of a good parent.

To provide the most robust test of these hypotheses and parsimonious description of findings, we present the results from three samples in aggregate form both as a *mega-analysis* of the combined sample and as an internal meta-analysis of the three separate study effects. Because modestly-sized true effects seldom replicate across a set of smaller samples, replicability experts advocate for combining datasets using the same measures in a mega-analysis to provide the most precise effect size estimates (Lakens and Etz 2017; Schimmack 2012; Simmons 2014). However, given that the methods and the findings varied somewhat across our samples, we also aimed to provide a transparent summary of the effect sizes from each sample along with internal meta-analyses of these effect sizes, weighted by study sample. We also report results for each study in the accompanying tables. (See the [online supplement](#) for detailed procedures of each study.) In an effort to highlight the most robust patterns of results, we will interpret as meaningful only those findings that emerged in both our mega- and meta-analyses.

Method

Participants

Three independent samples of heterosexual Canadian undergraduate women participated in our research, for a total combined sample of 360 participants (Sample 1 = 145, Sample 2 = 95, Sample 3 = 120). In Sample 3, 60% ($n = 72$) of participants self-identified as East Asian, and 17.5% ($n = 21$) self-identified as Caucasian. The remaining participants self-identified as Southeast or South Asian ($n = 6$), Middle Eastern ($n = 2$), Hispanic/Latina ($n = 1$), or mixed ($n = 10$). (Information on race/ethnicity was not collected for the first

two samples, but because all three samples were drawn from the same population they are likely to have a similar demographic makeup.)

Procedure and Measures

The first two studies were conducted online, and the third was conducted in person. (See the [online supplement](#) for details and differences among studies.) For the purposes of conducting the mega-analysis across these samples, we will focus on reporting and testing the measures that were conceptually similar across studies. All three studies followed roughly the same procedure, in which women first responded to questions about their career aspirations and future life expectations, and then they provided ratings of their mate preferences.

In order to cultivate a mindset of long-term life planning, participants were first asked to provide their demographic information and complete measures of their career interest, career goals, and family versus career prioritization. After answering these questions, participants were given the following instruction:

We would now like you to imagine what your life is going to be like in 15 years. Please take the next few moments to really think about and visualize your future life (15 years down the road). To help you in this activity we have provided some questions to guide your thoughts. Please answer the following questions indicating what will MOST LIKELY be the case for you.

Participants were required to confirm that they had read and understood these instructions before proceeding to the questions about their future, possible-selves (e.g., career aspirations and role expectations).

After completing these questions about their aspirations and expectations for the future, participants responded to our key mate preference measures. They were given the following instruction:

In this section of the study, we are interested in the mate preferences of university students. Therefore, we will ask you about your current attitudes and preferences, including what you look for in an ideal mate. The questions in the next part of the survey are concerned with your CURRENT attitudes and preferences. Please answer as honestly as possible in terms of how you feel at present.

After confirming that they understood these instructions, participants provided ratings of desired qualities in a potential mate, evaluated the desirability of each of three male exemplars, and, lastly, reported their traditional gender role attitudes

(among other measures reported in the [online supplement](#)). In the following, we describe the measures most relevant to testing our primary hypotheses. (Additional measures not analyzed in the present paper are reported by study in the [online supplement](#)).

Demographics

Participants reported their age, gender, year in university (1 to 5+), major, and the highest level of education they plan to complete (1 = some high school or less, 2 = high school diploma or equivalent, 3 = some college/university, 4 = college diploma, 5 = university diploma, 6 = some graduate/professional school, 7 = graduate/professional degree).

Career Aspirations

Participants reported their personal aspirations to prioritize family versus career goals based on an average of three items used in previous research ($\alpha = .91$; Durante et al. 2012) where higher scores represent greater aspirations to prioritize career over family. Each item was framed as a semantic differential asking participants to “Please indicate which is more important to you in terms of your future”, with response options ranging from 1 (*Having a family*) to 9 (*Having a career*) with no midpoint label.

Role Expectations

Participants responded to several questions about what they imagine their lives will be like 15 years in the future. (See the [online supplement](#) for complete list of items in each study.) Embedded among these questions were participants’ self-reported expected likelihood of becoming the primary caregiver and the primary economic provider of their future families, as indicated by their response on a 0 (*not likely*) to 6 (*very likely*) scale separately for each role.

Mate Preferences: Ratings of Desired Qualities

After providing the information about their envisioned futures, participants rated the importance of each of 18 potential traits (mainly filler) in a future partner from 1 (*not at all*) to 7 (*very much*). (See the [online supplement](#) for complete list of traits.). The two traits that were central to our hypotheses were: “qualities of a good parent” and “financial resources.”

Mate Preferences: Ratings of Exemplars

Finally, women rated the long-term mate desirability of three male exemplars who were depicted as either career-oriented, family-oriented or career-family balanced. The stimuli for these prototypical male exemplars were adapted from prior

studies, in which they were equated for positivity of the description/likeability of exemplar (Croft et al. 2019). Each exemplar profile began with a brief description of the university major the man was pursuing, followed by a brief statement of his post-graduation career goals in his chosen field. Then, each profile featured one of the following three descriptions (randomized and counter-balanced in order of presentation within participants; note these descriptions were from Study 3, but Studies 1 and 2 featured similar profiles; see the [online supplement](#) for all exemplar profiles): (a) *Career-oriented* (“... and I think that will pay off in the long-run as I move up the corporate ladder. I believe my life will be made even richer by having a loving, supportive wife and a couple of children too”); (b) *Career-family balanced* (“...and after my wife and I have kids, I’ll do everything I can to avoid working on nights and weekends. I believe my life will be made even richer by having a good balance between a productive work life and a happy home life”); or (c) *Family-oriented* (“...but once I become a dad, I plan to cut back on my hours substantially. I believe my life will be made even richer by becoming a stay-at-home-dad when my kids are small, in order to be more involved in their upbringing”).

Participants were asked to use a scale from 1 (*very undesirable*) to 9 (*very desirable*) to respond to the prompt: “Imagine that you are currently single and interested in entering a long-term relationship with someone of the opposite sex. How desirable is someone like this man (above) as your long-term partner?” This single item measure of desirability was assessed in Studies 1 and 2 for each exemplar, but in Study 3, participants responded to a longer set of eight questions rating each man’s attractiveness as a partner ($\alpha_{career} = .95$; $\alpha_{balanced} = .95$; $\alpha_{family} = .95$). Questions included items such as: “Do you find it easy to imagine a future with this person?” and “How interested are you in meeting this person?” (see the [online supplement](#) for a complete list); ratings were given on a Likert-type scale from 1 (*not at all*) to 9 (*very much*). Because these eight scale items were ultimately averaged into a single

index of exemplar desirability for each exemplar type, and because all three studies used the same type of 1–9 response scale, we were able to combine Study 3’s ratings with the ratings from Studies 1 and 2 for the combined sample.

Traditional Gender Role Attitudes

We measured individual variation in participants’ traditional gender role attitudes according to Larsen and Long’s (1988) Traditional/Egalitarian Sex Role Scale (TESR; 20 items; $\alpha = .91$; e.g., “Ultimately, a woman should submit to her husband’s decision.”) on a 5-point scale where higher averaged scores represent more traditional beliefs. This measure was included as a control variable, given evidence reviewed earlier that some within-gender variation in mate preferences is predicted by individual differences in gender role attitudes (Eastwick et al. 2006).

Results

Descriptive Statistics for the Combined Sample

We began by characterizing the general beliefs and preferences of our combined sample (see Table 1 for descriptive statistics of all samples). Overall, the young women in our studies espoused relatively progressive gender role attitudes ($M = 2.67$, $SD = .61$, where 5 = traditional gender role attitudes); however, they also envisioned a future that would align with traditional roles. Most women, on average, aspired to prioritize their family (1) over their career (9; $M = 4.66$, $SD = 1.93$; one sample t -test against the scale midpoint of 5, $t(359) = -3.39$, $p = .001$), and they expected to become the primary caregiver ($M = 4.03$, $SD = 1.35$, where 6 = extremely likely) rather than the primary breadwinner of their future families ($M = 2.92$, $SD = 1.21$), $t(358) = -10.87$, $p < .001$, $d = .25$. Importantly, even though aspirations and expectations

Table 1 Descriptive statistics for all predictor and outcome variables within and across samples

Variables	Sample 1 <i>n</i> = 145 <i>M</i> (<i>SD</i>)	Sample 2 <i>n</i> = 95 <i>M</i> (<i>SD</i>)	Sample 3 <i>n</i> = 120 <i>M</i> (<i>SD</i>)	Combined <i>n</i> = 360 <i>M</i> (<i>SD</i>)
Age	20.62 (2.11)	20.75 (2.83)	19.39 (1.39)	20.26 (2.23)
Traditional gender role attitudes	2.66 (.61)	2.74 (.64)	2.62 (.57)	2.67 (.61)
Aspirations to prioritize career over family	4.25 (1.87)	6.22 (1.59)	3.90 (1.51)	4.66 (1.93)
Expectations:				
Likelihood breadwinner	2.90 (1.18)	3.09 (1.31)	2.81 (1.15)	2.92 (1.21)
Likelihood caregiver	4.02 (1.15)	3.97 (1.37)	4.09 (1.05)	4.03 (1.35)
Mate preferences:				
Importance of parenting qualities	5.70 (1.43)	5.87 (1.34)	6.43 (.77)	5.99 (1.26)
Importance of financial resources	4.90 (1.40)	4.95 (1.39)	5.48 (1.32)	5.11 (1.39)
Desirability of career-oriented exemplar	5.94 (1.68)	6.02 (1.70)	4.75 (1.82)	5.57 (1.82)
Desirability of career-family balanced exemplar	7.35 (1.80)	7.05 (1.88)	5.11 (1.80)	6.52 (2.08)
Desirability of family-oriented exemplar	6.36 (1.91)	6.01 (1.89)	5.10 (1.85)	5.85 (1.96)
Preference for family- over career-oriented exemplar	.41 (2.29)	-.01 (2.46)	.35 (1.89)	.28 (2.22)

were significantly correlated ($r_{breadwinner} = .252, p < .001$; $r_{caregiver} = -.208, p < .001$), the small magnitudes of these relationships suggest that women clearly made a distinction between their personal career aspirations and their role expectations as negotiated with a future relationship partner.

When rating potential mate characteristics, which were measured on the same response scale and are therefore directly comparable for statistical purposes, women valued qualities of a good parent ($M = 5.99, SD = 1.26$) significantly more than financial resources ($M = 5.11, SD = 1.39$), $t(359) = 10.77, p < .001, d = .57$. Similarly, they rated the balanced exemplar as most desirable ($M = 6.52, SD = 2.08$), followed by the family-oriented exemplar ($M = 5.85, SD = 1.96$), and with the career-oriented exemplar being rated as the least desirable of the three ($M = 5.57, SD = 1.82, F(1, 359) = 93.35, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .21$, and all three average ratings of exemplar desirability were significantly different from one another (all $ps < .02$). Specifically, pairwise comparisons revealed that the balanced exemplar was rated more desirable than both the career-oriented ($d = .46, p < .001$) and the family-oriented exemplars ($d = .38, p < .001$). The family oriented-exemplar was also rated as more desirable than the career-oriented exemplar ($d = .13, p = .017$).

Similarity and Complementarity in Mate Preferences

Analytic Strategy

Our goal was to test concurrent similarity and complementarity relationships between women's career aspirations and role expectations, predicting their preferences for a mate (controlling for traditional gender role attitudes). Using separate OLS regression analyses for each outcome variable, we predicted women's preferred mate qualities and their mate desirability ratings from their traditional gender role attitudes, work/family aspirations (prioritization of career over family), and their imagined future role expectations (likelihood of becoming primary breadwinner and caregiver). Testing the models in this way allowed us to simultaneously account for the within-group variation that can exist in predicting women's multi-

faceted preferences for a romantic partner, along with their attitudes toward gender roles in general. We conducted these analyses on the combined sample (i.e., a mega-analysis) and also, given the methodological variation across the studies, carried out an internal meta-analysis of the weighted effect sizes from each study. Using the recommendations of Lipsey and Wilson (2001), this internal meta-analysis compared the regression coefficients (unstandardized bs) resulting from all key analyses within each of the three samples.

Mate Preference for Parenting Qualities

As seen in Table 2, women's traditional gender role attitudes predicted lower valuing of parenting qualities in a mate. However, controlling for their attitudes, results also revealed some evidence for both similarity and complementarity. Women who *aspired* to prioritize family over career and who *expected* to become the primary caregiver were more likely to value parenting qualities in a mate, providing support for similarity. However, over and above these similarity effects, women who *expected* to become the primary economic provider for their future family placed somewhat higher value on qualities of a good parent in a potential partner, providing a complementarity effect that was significant in the meta-analysis, but, despite being similar in magnitude, proved nonsignificant in the mega-analysis ($p = .079$).

Mate Preference for Financial Resources

Results of the same regression model predicting the importance of a potential partner's access to financial resources revealed stronger evidence of complementarity (see Table 3). In both the mega-analysis of the combined sample and the meta-analysis of effect sizes, women who imagine becoming the primary breadwinner of their future families were less likely to value a potential partner's financial resources. In addition, women who aspired to prioritize career over family exhibited a small similarity preference for men with greater resources. This effect was significant in the meta-analysis but not significant in the mega-analysis of the combined sample ($p = .074$).

Table 2 Summary of regression analyses predicting the perceived importance of parenting qualities

	Sample 1 b (SE)	Sample 2 b (SE)	Sample 3 b (SE)	Mega-analysis b (SE)	Meta-analysis b (SE)	Support for which hypothesis
Study/Sample (covariate)	–	–	–	.342 (.072)***	–	–
Gender role beliefs (covariate)	–.245 (.184)	–.463 (.206)*	–.356 (.124)**	–.342 (.105)**	–.350 (.092)***	–
Aspiration to prioritize career over family	–.348 (.064)***	.093 (.087)	–.082 (.050)	–.123 (.034)***	–.136 (.036)***	Similarity
Expected role as breadwinner	.317 (.098)**	–.111 (.104)	.097 (.060)	.102 (.054)	.105 (.046)*	Complementarity
Expected role as caregiver	.071 (.075)	.302 (.099)**	.080 (.070)	.178 (.048)***	.124 (.045)***	Similarity

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$

Table 3 Summary of regression analyses predicting the perceived importance of financial resources

	Sample 1 b (SE)	Sample 2 b (SE)	Sample 3 b (SE)	Mega-analysis b (SE)	Meta-analysis b (SE)	Support for which hypothesis?
Study/Sample (covariate)	–	–	–	.286 (.081)***	–	–
Gender role beliefs (covariate)	.387 (.195)*	.655 (.212)**	.277 (.209)	.395 (.118)**	.435 (.118)***	–
Aspiration to prioritize career over family	.057 (.068)	.175 (.089)	.211 (.084)*	.069 (.038)	.133 (.045)**	Similarity
Expected role as breadwinner	–.220 (.104)*	–.205 (.107)	–.312 (.101)**	–.241 (.060)***	–.248 (.060)***	Complementarity
Expected role as caregiver	.067 (.080)	.057 (.102)	.192 (.119)	.086 (.054)	.091 (.056)	Neither

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$

Lastly, women's expectation to become the primary caregiver did not significantly predict a desire for financial resources in a mate over and above the evidence that women with traditional gender role beliefs valued a mate's financial resources.

Ratings of Exemplars

The same regression analysis was repeated predicting women's relative preference for the family-oriented over the career-oriented exemplar. This exemplar preference index was created by subtracting desirability ratings of the career-oriented exemplar from the desirability ratings of the family-oriented exemplars, such that higher scores represent a stronger preference for the family exemplar. (Results of regression analyses on the each of the exemplars individually can be found in the [online supplement](#)).

Results revealed that women with more traditional gender role attitudes had a strong and significant preference for the career- over the family-oriented exemplar (see Table 4). But controlling for women's traditional attitudes, those who aspire to prioritize their career (versus family) preferred a career-oriented mate to a family-oriented one, providing support for similarity. Over and above this similarity effect, however, we observed that women who expect to become the primary breadwinner of their families showed a greater preference for a family-oriented mate, providing support for complementarity. Finally, expectations of becoming the primary caregiver

did not uniquely or reliably predict these exemplar preferences.

Discussion

The purpose of the current research was to examine whether young heterosexual Canadian women's career aspirations and role expectations predict their mate preferences in ways that suggest concurrent similarity and complementary processes. The most novel prediction of the current research was that women who expect to become primary breadwinners would be more attracted to the family-oriented potential partners, based on the assumption that these men would enable women to engage in career-focused roles while simultaneously having a thriving family. Although the pattern of results varied within the individual samples, the mega- and meta-analyses of regression coefficients indicated overall support for both the complementarity and similarity hypotheses. Overall, these patterns seem to suggest that women's *aspirations* to prioritize career over family seem to predict a desire for similarity in a potential mate whereas women's *expectations* to become a primary economic provider seem to predict a desire for complementarity in a potential mate. Women's *expectations* to become a primary caregiver only reliably predicted a similarity effect on one mate preference variable – the importance of parenting qualities in a partner.

Table 4 Summary of regression analyses predicting the preference for family- over career-oriented exemplars

	Sample 1 b (SE)	Sample 2 b (SE)	Sample 3 b (SE)	Mega-analysis b (SE)	Meta-analysis b (SE)	Support for which hypothesis?
Study/Sample (covariate)	–	–	–	–.065 (.131)	–	–
Gender role beliefs (covariate)	–.626 (.311)*	–1.258 (.381)**	–.590 (.311)	–.806 (.191)***	–.770 (.190)***	–
Aspiration to prioritize career over family	–.368 (.108)**	–.124 (.160)	.005 (.125)	–.185 (.062)**	–.191 (.073)	Similarity
Expected role as breadwinner	.444 (.166)**	.310 (.192)	.162 (.151)	.287 (.097)**	.295 (–.097)**	Complementarity
Expected role as caregiver	.035 (.128)	.063 (.183)	–.218 (.176)	.006 (.087)	–.025 (.090)	Neither

The entries above are based on difference scores

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$

In support of a similarity hypothesis, women who aspired to prioritize family over career were especially attracted to men who have the qualities of a good parent, were less concerned about his access to financial resources, and tended to prefer a more family-oriented (vs. career-oriented) potential partner. But over and above this preference for similarity in a mate, women's expectations for their future roles within a dyadic partnership also uniquely predicted their mate preferences in a complementary way. Particularly when focusing on women's expectations, we found that women who believe it is likely that they could become a breadwinner in their future family reported a preference for a family-oriented partner with the qualities of a good parent (and downplayed the importance of financial resources). It is worth noting that these findings emerged when controlling for personal gender role attitudes and aspirations to prioritize career versus family. Importantly, we do not dispute the fact that people affiliate with others who share similar beliefs and values; however, after accounting for these effects, a consideration of complementary role division may also factor into women's mate preferences.

Women's role expectations in their future relationship predicted only one pattern of similarity: women who expect to become the primary caregiver also value parenting qualities in their future partner. This isolated effect could suggest a desire for a partner who shares a similar approach to parenting, even while complementarity patterns point to ways that women seek out a partner whose role interests might strategically help them achieve their own goals. Perhaps a parenting measure that more clearly distinguished between parenting style and parenting involvement would have shown more precise effects. That is, women who expect to become the breadwinner might especially seek out a partner who wants to be highly involved with childcare while also preferring a mate with a similar parenting style. Furthermore, women who expect to become the primary caregiver might be especially attracted to a partner whose parenting style is framed in traditional ways (i.e., as a playmate, a disciplinarian, or a weekend companion).

These aggregate effects point to the importance of considering the dyadic nature of the mate selection processes and the trade-offs that women anticipate, which seem to operate alongside and might, at times, even be stronger predictors of mate selection than concerns with similarity. The caveat, of course, is by controlling for traditional gender role beliefs, we might have removed some of the variability that would be linked to seeking similarity in a partner.

Finally, another meaningful and interesting finding to highlight is that, despite endorsing relatively progressive gender role attitudes in general, women in our studies personally aspired to prioritize family over career and also tended to expect to become the primary caregivers of the future children within their romantic partnerships. These patterns provide further evidence of the inherent complexity within young heterosexual women's gender role attitudes, aspirations, and expectations

when considering their long-term, abstract lives. Importantly, these findings indicate that even if women themselves wish to "have it all" or to prioritize their career goals, they may still face very real constraints when it comes to the realistic trade-off of trying to juggle work and family with their future partners. In this way, it makes sense that women's mate preferences and desires for their future partners would also be highly complex and responsive to the kinds of roles and responsibilities women are envisioning for themselves. Indeed, these complex aspirations and expectations predicting mate preferences may reflect the degree to which men's and women's roles are changing asymmetrically, such that women are continuing to fulfill behaviors consistent with their traditional gender role while simultaneously adopting new ones (Croft et al. 2015).

Limitations and Future Directions

Given the growing concern over unstable effect size estimates from smaller samples, we have prioritized drawing conclusions from effects aggregating across three separate samples. To do this combining, we have used both a mega- and meta-analysis as two alternative ways to more precisely estimate effect sizes rather than merely counting the number of times a given effect is significant in a series of samples. Although it might seem like a limitation that the effects vary across each of the samples, simulation studies reveal that inconsistent patterns of effects across a series of studies are to be expected (Lakens and Etz 2017). Of course, it is also possible that slight deviations in sampling characteristics or ordering of items could account for the variability of effects across studies. Despite the fact that reliance on self-reported preferences is typical for research on mate preferences, perhaps other ecologically valid methods (like those used in Study 3 of the current paper) using behavioral measures would provide clearer insight into women's preferences that are less constrained by women's self-reports. Indeed, some research on mate selection indicates that people might believe they have certain preferences in a potential partner, but experience a shift in priorities upon being faced with actual mate options from which to choose (Eastwick and Finkel 2008; Tidwell et al. 2013). Future research is needed to examine these hypotheses with behavioral measures.

One particular question that cannot be answered by the current studies is why both similarity and complementarity can factor into women's mate preferences at the same time. Indeed, it stands to reason that to the degree women's career aspirations and role expectations are at odds with one another (i.e., a woman aspires to prioritize her career but expects that she will still need to adopt a primary caregiving role), the more likely these factors are to diverge in their prediction of mate preferences. If women's mate preferences are indeed responsive to complementary processes associated with the struggle

to maintain work-life balance, we should find that career-ambitious women would show the greatest evidence of complementary mate preferences when primed to expect work-life conflict in the future. In Study 3, we attempted to test this hypothesis, and although our manipulation was effective in elevating concerns about work-life conflict, it did not moderate any of the observed relationships. Given the extensive media coverage allocated to women's motivation and struggle to "have it all," this remains an interesting question for future research, especially considering that, for women, "having it all" might reasonably mean having romantic partners who share both their career and family orientations.

The current research focused solely on women's aspirations and expectations predicting their mate preferences. But an interesting avenue for future research on this topic could be to explore how men's aspirations and expectations predict what they look for in a long-term female partner. To our knowledge, this has not yet been studied systematically. On the one hand, it stands to reason that parallel similarity and complementarity processes underlie men's mate preferences, especially to the degree that these processes occur in response to real-world trades-offs between trying to balance one's career and family obligations within a romantic partnership. On the other hand, given that the traits, roles, and expectations ascribed to women are changing much more quickly than those ascribed to men (Croft et al. 2015), men might not demonstrate mate preferences that seem to respond to the changing landscape for women in the family context. It will be important for future research to examine what young men prioritize in a romantic partner as women continue to experience greater role flexibility and financial independence in Western societies.

Practice Implications

Interpreting the results of our studies through the lens of social role theory (Eagly and Steffen 1984), we highlight some key implications of our findings. First, a key finding from our work is that women who expect to adopt nontraditional roles within their relationship dyad (i.e., being the breadwinner) prefer a mate with complementary skills and goals. Given this pattern in women's mate preferences, we might wonder, as men begin to recognize and appreciate that women are seeking partners with stronger parenting qualities and a family-orientation, whether these qualities will become more common and valued among men. Indeed, if men perceive that they can better attract a mate by pursuing these nontraditional self-aspects and skills, they may come to internalize them. This shift in the priorities and internalizations of men's family roles and priorities could subsequently lead to their increased involvement in shared domestic responsibilities. In turn, all of these processes could signal to men that their own roles and values need not be as constrained by the traditional gender

role stereotypes of high agency and low communion. It is conceivable that an increase in men's domestic involvement could subsequently mean fewer constraints for women's own roles and career pursuits.

Our findings suggest that if women can realistically envision themselves as future breadwinners, they will be more likely to pursue romantic relationships with men who exhibit strong parental qualities; this is important because past research suggests that women who establish romantic partnerships with these types of men (versus less parental men) may benefit from healthier long-term relationship outcomes. For example, past work has shown that men who exhibit higher trait-level parental caring and tenderness toward infants also tend to be higher in empathic concern and a long-term mating orientation (an indicator of monogamous attitudes)—both of which should be expected to contribute positively to relationship satisfaction and length (Beall and Schaller 2014; Buckels et al. 2015). Given the benefits of dating more parental men, the current findings highlight an urgency to showcase more breadwinning female exemplars in the mainstream. The more young women are exposed to successful, career-oriented role models, the more realistic their expectations may become about assuming those roles themselves; this, in turn, may lead these women to experience happier, healthier, and more stable romantic relationships with highly parental men.

Conclusions

The current research sheds new light on the complexity underlying young, heterosexual women's preferences for long-term romantic partners. Our work began with a consideration of young women's desire to "have it all" (i.e., a thriving career and fulfilling family life) and an assumption that this desire is likely to be facilitated by having a partner who is willing and able to share in caregiving and domestic responsibilities. We tested two theoretical hypotheses that, on the surface, may seem to be at odds with one another, and we found unique support for both. Specifically, our results suggest that when women are considering their own personal aspirations to prioritize career over family, they tend to prefer mates who have similar goals and outlooks; over and above this preference, though, we observed a pattern in which women's expectations for their roles within a romantic dyad (in this case, expecting to become the primary economic provider) predicted more complementary preferences for a partner. These findings support the notion that individuals' goals and impressions of their futures might have an impact on the kinds of decisions they are making in the present, as well as highlight the importance of accounting for multiple facets of individuals' priorities and expectations when assessing their mate preferences.

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