The Challenges of Keeping an Intimate Relationship: An Evolutionary Examination

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Abstract
Keeping an intimate relationship is challenging, and many people face difficulties in doing so. In the current research, we have attempted to identify these difficulties, within the context of an evolutionary theoretical framework. More specifically, by using a combination of qualitative research methods in a sample of 163 Greek-speaking participants, we identified 78 such difficulties. By employing maximum likelihood analysis on the scores of 1,099 Greek-speaking participants, we classified these difficulties in 12 broader factors. The most important factor was “Fading away enthusiasm,” followed by “Long work hours” and “Lack of personal time and space.” Almost 70% of the participants indicated that at least one factor, and 41% indicated that three or more factors caused them difficulties. Significant sex effects were found for most factors, indicating that men and women differed in the importance they ascribed to these difficulties. Moreover, significant age, marital status and number of children effects were found for several factors.

Keywords
difficulties in keeping an intimate relationship, keeping an intimate relationship, mating, mismatch problem, intimate relationships

Date received: February 13, 2020. Revision Submitted: July 30, 2020; Accepted: July 31, 2020

Introduction
Maintaining an intimate relationship is challenging. Across different societies, divorce has become increasingly common; for instance, in Western societies, it has been estimated that one in two marriages would end up in divorce (Cherlin, 2009; Raley & Bumpass, 2003; Schoen & Standish, 2001). Recent studies in the Greek cultural context have found that about one in three adult people experienced difficulties in keeping an intimate relationship (Apostolou et al., 2018), which can also potentially explain why a large proportion of the population does not have an intimate partner (Apostolou, Papadopoulou, & Georgiadou, 2019). The present study aims to identify the difficulties people face in keeping an intimate relationship, to classify them in broader categories, to assess their importance, and to examine some of their contingencies.

Current Literature
We were not able to locate any study that has attempted to examine the difficulties people face in maintaining an intimate relationship. The most relevant literature has to do with the reasons for getting a divorce. In particular, the difficulties in keeping an intimate relationship are likely to lead to the termination of a relationship, which means that this literature could provide us with insights about the difficulties in maintaining a relationship. Studies have found that predictors of marital dissolution included domestic violence, conflict, infidelity, a weak commitment to marriage, and low levels of love and trust between spouses (Clements et al., 2004; DeMaris, 2000; Gottman & Levenson, 2000; Kurdek, 2002; Lawrence & Bradbury, 2001; Orbuch et al., 2002).

In more detail, Bloom and colleagues (1985) employed a sample of 153 newly separated but not yet divorced individuals in the United States, and found that the most common sources of marital dissatisfaction were communication difficulties, value conflicts and boredom, while physical abuse, drinking and drug abuse were the least common sources. Amato and
Previti (2003), analyzed the interviews of 208 divorced individuals in the United States, and found that infidelity was the most commonly reported cause, followed by incompatibility, drinking or drug use, and growing apart. Another study employed a sample of 886 divorcing parents in the United States, and found that the most common reasons for divorce, cited by both men and women, were growing apart, communication problems, and not enough attention from the spouse (Hawkins et al., 2012). They found also that, infidelity was given as an important reason for divorce by slightly more than one third of respondents. A more recent study employed a sample of 515 Greek-speaking participants, and found that being an abusive spouse was the most important factor for divorce, followed by incompatibility and in-law problems (Apostolou, Constantinou, & Anagnostopoulos, 2019).

The literature on the reasons which could lead to divorce is insightful for understanding the difficulties that people face in maintaining an intimate relationship. For instance, it indicates that a common such reason is infidelity, which suggests that a taste for sexual variation, accompanied by a lack of restraint, is one possible difficulty in keeping an intimate relationship. Still, this literature is far from adequate, as there may be many difficulties in maintaining an intimate relationship, which may not be serious enough to lead to the dissolution of marriage, and thus, are not captured by the literature on divorce. Accordingly, research in required to study specifically the difficulties that people face in keeping an intimate relationship. These difficulties could be better understood within the context of an evolutionary theoretical framework that will be discussed next.

Why People Face Difficulties in Keeping an Intimate Relationship

Conflict Between the Sexes

In an evolutionary perspective, human behavior arises from brain mechanisms or adaptations that have evolved to enable the propagation of genes that code for them to future generations. Thus, in a general sense, people are understood to behave in a way that enables them to increase the representation of the genes they carry to future generations, usually called fitness (Tooby & Cosmides, 2015). The main way to achieve this goal is to have children who carry their parents’ genetic material to the next generation, and in sexually reproducing species like our own, doing so demands gaining access to the reproductive capacity of the opposite sex. In addition, children require considerable parental investment in order to reach sexual maturity and become independent from their parents. Therefore, gaining access to the reproductive capacity of the opposite sex is usually not sufficient for ensuring that one’s genetic material will pass successfully to the next generation. What is required for this endeavor to be successful is establishing a context where two parents consistently divert investment to their children. The fitness benefits from such arrangement translate into selection pressures for mechanisms to evolve that would make establishing and keeping an intimate relationship possible. For instance, emotions such as romantic love and jealousy are adaptations which enable people to attract and retain partners (Buss, 2017b). This theoretical perspective explains why most people strive to establish and keep an intimate relationship, and could also explain why many people frequently face difficulties in doing so.

More specifically, common reproductive benefits motivate individuals to come together and to keep a relationship for some time. This endeavor would be smooth if the two parties had only common reproductive interests. Yet, by being genetically different, the two parties have also diverging interests, which means that one party could increase its reproductive success at the expense of the other party. For instance, one party may employ a mating strategy that increases its fitness at the expense of the other party.

In more detail, men’s and women’s approach toward mating can be seen as strategic, in the sense that people follow a strategy when engaging in mating that enables them to increase their reproductive success (Buss & Schmitt, 1993). Three such strategies could be identified: A short-term mating strategy involves engaging in many casual relationships and investing little in any offspring that may come from them, while a long-term mating strategy involves establishing few intimate relationships, and investing heavily in any offspring that come from them (Buss & Schmitt, 1993, 2019). Both strategies have advantages and disadvantages. For instance, a short-term mating strategy could enable a woman to secure help and assistance from several different men, but she would face the risk of raising a child on her own. A long-term mating strategy would enable a man to have children who receive adequate support from both parents, but he would forgo the opportunity to gain sexual access to other women. A mixed strategy involves people entering in long-term relationships but have parallel casual relationships, which could potentially enable men and women to receive the benefits of both the long- and short-term strategy, without paying their costs (Buss & Schmitt, 1993). For instance, a man who adopts such strategy could establish a family and have children who receive long-term investment from both parents, but at the same time, exploit opportunities for gaining sexual access to different women. It needs to be said that these strategies are not conscious, in the sense that people choose to adopt one or the other. The fitness benefits of these strategies have selected for adaptations that would enable people to adopt them. For example, individuals would not feel sexually satisfied with one partner that would motivate them to adopt a short-term mating strategy.

The adoption of a mixed strategy by one partner conflicts with the interests of the other, causing difficulties in keeping a relationship. More specifically, men can remain in a long-term relationship, but exploit any opportunities for extra-pair sex. This strategy is not to the best interest of their partners, who risk losing investment to other women and their children, contracting a sexual transmitted disease, losing their partners to another woman and so on. In a similar vein, women can gain resources such as gifts by engaging in extra-pair sex, a strategy which is not to the best interests of their partners, who risk
raising other men’s children, losing their partners to other men, contracting a sexual transmitted disease and so on.

Extra-pair mating is only one area where the conflict between the sexes is materialized (see Buss, 2017a, for a more inclusive discussion of the topic). It constitutes a good example however, of the argument that keeping an intimate relationship is inherently difficult because the parties involved have conflicting interests. On this basis, it is predicted that many of the reasons which caused difficulties to people in keeping an intimate relationships, would reflect conflicting interests between parties.

Adoption of a Short-Term Mating Strategy

The adoption of a short-term mating strategy, could prevent people from keeping an intimate relationship. More specifically, several individuals may adopt a short-term mating strategy; having however, a long-term intimate relationship would interfere with this strategy, as it would prevent people from having different partners. Thus, their behavioral mechanisms may have evolved to prevent the formation of long-term relationships: People may have an intense desire for sexual variety accompanied by high libido, they may not fall in love or they may have feelings which quickly reside following sexual intercourse. On this basis, we predict that several of the reasons which caused difficulties to people in keeping an intimate relationship would reflect the adoption of a short-term mating strategy.

Mismatch Problem

As discussed above, converging interests over mating have led to the evolution of mechanisms that enable people to keep an intimate relationship. Nevertheless, these, as all other adaptations, have been shaped in ancestral human societies, and may not work well in contemporary ones (Tooby & Cosmides, 2015). This is likely to be the case if the contemporary conditions in which mating takes place are considerably different from ancestral human conditions, and the transition was relatively recent for selection forces to have sufficient time to adjust these adaptations to the demands of the modern environment. This is known as the mismatch problem (Crawford, 1998; Li et al., 2018; Maner & Kenrick, 2010), and it is likely to be at play in causing people difficulties in keeping a relationship.

More specifically, there are reasons to believe that the environment in which mating takes place has experienced considerable changes very recently in the evolutionary timescale. In more detail, anthropological, historical and phylogenetic evidence indicates that in ancestral human societies mate choice was typically regulated, with parents arranging marriages for their children (Apostolou, 2014; Walker et al., 2011). In addition, anthropological, historical and physiological evidence indicates that in ancestral human societies, male-male competition, where men form alliances in order to monopolize by force the women of other men, was also strong (Puts, 2010, 2016). Anthropological and historical evidence indicates further that, in ancestral human societies, our ancestors had also space to exercise mate choice, usually through divorce or extra-pair relationships (Apostolou, 2017a).

The transition that followed the industrial revolution in the 18th century has given rise to post-industrial societies where mate choice is not regulated or forced, but it is freely exercised. This transition had occurred very recently for selection forces to have sufficient time to adjust the adaptations related to keeping an intimate relationship to the demands of the modern context. Accordingly, people carry adaptations that may have worked effectively in the ancestral environment, but may be less effective in enabling people to keep a relationship in the current environment. In more detail, one important difference between ancestral pre-industrial societies and contemporary post-industrial ones is that the former were lacking social support and protection systems. In particular, when misfortune happens, in most post-industrial societies people can rely on social structures such as free health care system, unemployment benefits, food coupons etc. which was not the case in ancestral pre-industrial societies, where people had to rely on their families to deal with such misfortunes. Similarly, as there were no civil protection systems such as the police, people had also to rely on their families for protection from internal and external threats. Furthermore, in contemporary post-industrial societies, people gain their subsistence by working outside their family, while in in ancestral pre-industrial societies, the family was the main unit of production. For instance, the family members would cultivate its land and herd its animals, which was the primary way for them to gain subsistence. Accordingly, in an ancestral context, the formation of a family was not only a way to have children, but it was necessary for subsistence, protection and support in case of misfortune.

These factors would have provided a strong incentive to our ancestors to keep their intimate relationships, overlooking several of their partners’ faults. For example, people would be reluctant to end a relationship that could lead to children, and would enable them to gain their subsistence because their partners lacked say a pleasant personality or were not always faithful. That is, the benefits of an intimate relationship in the pre-industrial context exceed considerably the costs of not having a pleasant personality and be at times unfaithful.

In contemporary post-industrial societies, the non-reproductive benefits of having a family have been largely gone away: People can rely on the well-developed social protection systems rather on their partners and other family members in case misfortune finds them, are protected by the police and the army and not by their partners, while they gain their subsistence by selling their labor outside their family unit. Therefore, the benefits of being in a relationship in order to receive help with the subsistence effort and protection, have considerable diminished in the contemporary context, and do not balance the costs of traits such as being unpleasant to be with and not always faithful. Accordingly, people would be less willing to overlook such faults, meaning that those who have
them would experience difficulties in keeping an intimate relationship.

In effect, strong selection pressures are exercised on these traits to adjust them to modern conditions: For instance, people would become more easygoing, which would make them more effective in keeping an intimate relationship. Nevertheless, the transition to post-industrialism has been very recent in evolutionary terms, meaning that such selection pressures have not yet materialized in shaping these adaptations to deal with the modern conditions. In effect, there should be several people today who have traits that make them difficult to be accepted as partners, and who would thus, face difficulties in keeping an intimate relationship.

Sex Differences

Due to biological differences arising from different evolutionary specializations, men’s reproductive success is positively related to the number of opposite-sex partners they can have sexual access to, which is not the case for women (Buss & Schmitt, 1993, 2019). For example, a man can produce 100 offspring by mating with 100 fertile women over the course of a year, whereas a monogamous man, similarly to a monogamous or a polygamous woman, would be able to sire only one child with his partner during that time.

This difference translates into selection pressures for behavioral mechanism to evolve, turning men more likely to adopt a short-term or a mixed strategy (Buss & Schmitt, 1993, 2019). As discussed above, the adoption of these strategies is likely to cause difficulties to people in keeping an intimate relationship. On this basis, we predict that a sex-difference would arise, with men facing more difficulties than women in keeping an intimate relationship due to reason associated with the adoption of a short-term or a mixed mating strategy.

Study 1

The purpose of this study was to identify the difficulties that people faced in keeping a romantic relationship.

Method

Participants

The research took place in a medium-sized private University in the Republic of Cyprus. Participation was voluntary, and people were required to be at least 18 years old in order to participate. Participants were recruited through an advertisement that was placed on Facebook. We advertised that we were looking for people who were experienced in intimate relationships. There were two groups of participants, a group responding to interviews and a group responding to open-ended questionnaires. With respect to the in-depth interviews, 40 Greek-speaking participants took part (20 women, 20 men). The mean age of women was 34.3 (SD = 7.4), and the mean age of men was 36.6 (SD = 7.1). Moreover, 44.2% of the participants were married, 26.2% were in a relationship, 15.2% were single and 14.4% were divorced. With respect to the open-ended questionnaires, 123 Greek-speaking participants took part (63 women, 60 men). The mean age of women was 30.5 (SD = 8.4), and the mean age of men was 32.1 (SD = 8.9). Furthermore, 31.3% of the participants were married, 28.2% were in a relationship, 25.6% were single and 14.8% were divorced.

Materials

In-depth interviews. In order to identify the different reasons that caused people difficulties in keeping an intimate relationship, a series of semi-structured interviews were conducted. The interviews took place in a psychology laboratory located at the University premises, and lasted 40 minutes on average. The interviews were conducted by one of the authors and one independent graduate student. Participants signed a consent form, and subsequently, they filled in their demographic details (i.e., sex, age, marital status).

Participants were asked to discuss the different difficulties they faced in keeping an intimate relationship. We employed follow-up and probing questions in order to get more detailed information on specific reasons. Participants’ responses were recorded on paper. Following the conclusion of the interview, participants were debriefed and thanked.

Open-ended questionnaires. The open-ended survey had two parts. In the first part, participants were asked to indicate as many reasons as they could, which caused them difficulties in keeping an intimate relationship. In the second part, demographic information was collected (i.e., sex, age, marital status).

Results

In order to analyze the data from the in-depth interviews and the open-ended questionnaires, the following procedure was adopted: Two independent graduate students were employed, a man and a woman, who coded and categorized responses to supraordinate categories. Similar responses were added to the supraordinate category, and when a dissimilar response arose, a new supraordinate category was created. Answers that contained multiple reasons were eliminated, as they were difficult to interpret. In addition, reasons with unclear or vague wording were also eliminated. After processing about 25% of the responses, the data for each coder were compared. The coders agreed to most of the supraordinate categories. For a few cases where there was not complete overlap, one of the authors was consulted and eventually agreement was reached for 100% of the supraordinate categories. Subsequently, coders proceeded to code the remaining responses. Overall, 78 difficulties in keeping an intimate relationship were identified.

Study 2

The purpose of this study was to classify the reasons identified in Study 1 to broader categories of reasons which caused difficulties to people in keeping an intimate relationship.
Methods

Participants

Four research assistants were employed for the purpose of this study. They recruited individuals who volunteered to take part in a research on romantic relationships (no payment was given). Prospective participants had to be adults (18 years old or older) in order to participate. The research took place in Greece and in the Republic of Cyprus, and the data collection process lasted 4 months. The participants were initially asked to sign a consent form, and subsequently they were given the survey. After completing the survey, they put the questionnaire in an unmarked envelope and sealed it. In total, 1,099 Greek-speaking participants took part (592 women, 507 men). The mean age of women was 32.7 (SD = 11.9) and the mean age of men was 33.5 (SD = 10.6). Moreover, 34.7% of the participants were married, 30.8% were single, 27.1% were in a relationship, 6.7% were divorced and 0.7% were widowed. Finally, participants had a mean of 0.81 (SD = 1.17) children.

Materials

The survey had two parts. In the first part, participants were asked to indicate their agreement on how each of the 78 items identified in Study 1 were likely to cause them difficulties in keeping an intimate relationship. Participants’ answers were recorded in a 5-point Likert scale: 1-strongly disagree, 5-strongly agree. Finally, in the second part, demographic information was collected (sex, age, marital status, number of children).

Results

Factor Structure

In order to classify the 78 reasons into broader factors, we employed maximum likelihood analysis using the direct oblimin as the rotation method. The KMO statistic indicated that our sample was very good for principal components analysis to be performed (KMO = .97). On the basis of the Kaiser criterion (Eigenvalue > 1), 12 factors have been extracted, and are presented in Table 1. Note that, we did not include any items with a factor loading below .300 (see Field, 2018). In addition, the “Frequently, I do not behave well to my partner” item loaded to the “Lack of effort factor” (.381) but also to the “Behavioral issues” factor (−.305). The “I often break out on my partner” loaded to the “Character issues” factor (.332) and to the “Behavioral issues” factor (−.301). Finally, the “I feel that a relationship constrains me” item loaded to the “Lack of personal time and space” factor (−.413), and to the “Clinginess” factor (.361). We classified the items to the factors for which they had higher loading. The internal consistency of the extracted factors (α) ranged from .94 to .68 with a mean of .82. Furthermore, we created 12 new variables by summing the scores of the difficulties composing each factor and dividing by their number. We subsequently performed maximum likelihood analysis on these variables. The results indicated only one extracted domain, suggesting that the extracted factors could not be classify to broader domains. Finally, we performed Pearson’s product moment correlation on the 12 variables and the results are presented in Table A in the Appendix.

The first factor that emerged was the “Lack of effort,” where people did not make enough effort for the relationship to work, did not look after their partners’ needs, lost interest in their partners, and became distant from them. In the “Bad sex” which followed next, participants indicated that bad sex, disagreement with their partners about intercourse frequency, and sexual incompatibility, caused them difficulties in keeping a relationship. In the “Behavioral issues,” participants indicated that being aggressive, having psychological problems and addictions prevented them from keeping an intimate relationship. Moreover, in the “Character issues,” participants indicated that being quirky, selfish and insecure constrained them from keeping a relationship. In the “Fading away enthusiasm,” enthusiasm and feelings of romantic love fading away quickly, made the continuation of the relationship difficult. “Children” also placed strain on the relationship, as they absorbed considerable time and energy from both partners.

Furthermore, in the “Social circle issues,” strain on the relationship emerged from partners not having good relationships with each other’s family and friends. In the “Lack of personal time and space,” people felt that they needed more personal time and space, and that their partners were oppressing them and were clingy. The “Clinginess” was the other side of this coin, with people becoming over-dependent and clingy on their partners, which presumably made keeping the relationship difficult. In the “Infidelity and abuse” which followed next, partners’ infidelities and physically abusive behavior caused difficulties to people in keeping a relationship. In the “Not being monogamous,” people indicated that they were not monogamous, and they wanted to have experiences with other partners, so being in an exclusive intimate relationship constrained them. Finally, in the “Long work hours,” people focused on their careers, so there was limited time left to invest in their relationship.

In order to get an estimate of importance, we placed the mean scores of each extracted factor in a hierarchical order. As we can see from Table 2, the highest mean was for the “Fading away enthusiasm,” followed by the “Long work hours” and the “Lack of personal time and space.” At the bottom of the hierarchy were the “Behavioral issues,” the “Social circle issues” and the “Not monogamous.” The standard deviations indicated that there was substantial variation in the scores for each factor. Thus, in order to get a more accurate understanding of how many participants indicated above average scores for each factor, we calculated the number of participants who gave above the mid of the scale scores (i.e., >3). As we can see from Table 2, the highest percentage was for the “Fading away enthusiasm,” followed
by the “Lack of personal time and space” and the “Long work hours.” The lowest percentages were for the “Behavioral issues,” the “Not monogamous” and the “Lack of effort.” Finally, we calculated how many participants indicated difficulties in more than one factors. We found that 30.9% did not give a mean score above “3” in any of the factors, meaning that 69.1% indicated an above “3” difficulty in at least one factor. More specifically, 16.8% indicated difficulty in one factor, 11.3% in two factors, 10.1% in three factors, 7.1% in four factors, and 23.8% in five or more factors.

### Significant Sex, Age, Marital Status and Number Of Children Effects

In order to identify significant effects, we performed a series of MANCOVAs. More specifically, we entered the items

**Table 1**. The Extracted Factors and the Respective Factor Loadings in Study 2.

| Factors                          | Factor loadings |
|----------------------------------|-----------------|
| Lack of effort                   |                 |
| I do not take into consideration my partner’s needs | .577 |
| I find it difficult to understand my partner’s needs | .562 |
| I find it difficult to tolerate my partner’s idiosyncrasies | .538 |
| I do not make enough effort for the relationship work | .509 |
| I neglect my partner             | .493 |
| My interest for my partner soon fades away | .485 |
| I become distant from my partner | .476 |
| My sexual interest for my partner soon fades away | .382 |
| Frequently, I do not behave well to my partner | .381 |
| I take my partner for granted    | .380 |
| I am not honest with my partner  | .379 |
| I do not easily compromise       | .318 |
| I find it difficult to communicate with my partner | .313 |
| Bad sex                          |                 |
| Bad sex                          | .482 |
| Disagreements with my partner about how often we have sex | .481 |
| Sexual incompatibility with my partner | .480 |
| Frequent fights with my partner  | .422 |
| Different goals with my partner  | .352 |
| Behavioral issues                |                 |
| I have psychological problems    | .684 |
| I often become violent to my partner | .662 |
| I have addictions—gambling, alcohol etc. | .581 |
| My parents/relatives intervene in my relationship | .405 |
| Character issues                 |                 |
| I am quirky                      | .578 |
| I am selfish                     | .512 |
| I am always complaining to my partner | .350 |
| My insecurities                 | .332 |
| I often break out on my partner  | .332 |
| My character                     | .306 |
| Fading away enthusiasm           |                 |
| I find the relationship’s routine tiring | .578 |
| My enthusiasm soon fades away    | .560 |
| I am not a routine person        | .536 |
| I get bored quickly             | .480 |
| I am not patient                | .363 |
| My feelings of romantic love soon fades away | .328 |
| My passion soon fades away       | .328 |
| Children                         |                 |
| My children are absorbing much of my energy, and not much is left for my relationship | .617 |
| My partner allocates most of his/her time to our children and very little to me | .589 |
| Frequent disagreements with my partner about how to raise our children | .493 |
| Social circle issues             |                 |
| My partner does not have good relationships with my parents and relatives | .600 |
| I do not have good relationships with my partner’s parents and relatives | .587 |
| My partner does not have good relationships with my friends | .582 |

(continued)
composing each factor as the dependent variables, the sex and the marital status as the independent categorical variables, and the age and the number of children as the continuous independent variables. Note that, for the marital status variable, we did not include the “widowed” category as it had only eight observations. Overall, 12 tests were performed, one for each factor. In order to avoid the problem of inflation arising from multiple comparisons, Bonferroni correction could be applied, setting the \( a \) to .004 \((.05/12)\). Accordingly, the reader may choose to consider as non-significant any effect that was above this level.

The results are presented in Tables 2 and 3, where we can see that, for most factors, significant sex-differences were found. For some factors such as “Lack of effort,” men gave higher scores than women, while for others such as “Children,” women gave higher scores than men. In general, however, men tended to give higher scores than women. For the “Infidelity and abuse” where the mean scores were similar for the two sexes, the sex-difference was predominantly located over the “My partner lacks sexual interest for me” item, where men gave higher scores \((M = 2.78, SD = 1.33)\) than women \((M = 2.54, SD = 1.44)\). Moreover, significant age effects were found for several factors. The direction of the age effect was not consistent but changed across factors (see Table 3). Moreover, the number of children was significant for the “Children” factor, with a positive regression coefficient sign, indicating that the more children participants had, the higher scores they gave to the items composing this factor. Finally, the marital status came significant for most factors. With respect to the “Children” factor, post-hoc analysis using Bonferroni indicated that, participants who were married gave significantly higher scores than participants who were in a relationship. For the remaining cases, participants who were married and in a relationship gave significantly higher scores than participants who were single and divorced.

Table 2. The Hierarchy of Factors and Sex Effects in Study 2.

| Factors                        | Overall | Women | Men | p-value | \( \eta^2 \) |
|--------------------------------|---------|-------|-----|---------|---------|
| Fading away enthusiasm         | 31.6    | 2.68  | 0.81| 2.62    | 0.79    | .001 | .024 |
| Long work hours                | 29.9    | 2.66  | 0.92| 2.59    | 0.94    | .012 | .010 |
| Lack of personal time and space| 31.0    | 2.61  | 0.93| 2.50    | 0.93    | .002 | .020 |
| Character issues               | 23.9    | 2.57  | 0.80| 2.64    | 0.82    | <.001| .026 |
| Clinginess                     | 21.6    | 2.51  | 0.76| 2.52    | 0.81    | .353 | .006 |
| Bad sex                        | 28.9    | 2.50  | 1.02| 2.46    | 1.05    | .050 | .011 |
| Infidelity and abuse           | 24.0    | 2.28  | 1.27| 2.28    | 1.36    | .005 | .012 |
| Children                       | 19.8    | 2.24  | 1.02| 2.26    | 1.06    | <.001| .022 |
| Lack of effort                 | 17.7    | 2.22  | 0.86| 2.13    | 0.88    | <.001| .052 |
| Social circle issues           | 14.9    | 2.15  | 0.84| 2.11    | 0.85    | .073 | .010 |
| Not monogamous                 | 16.0    | 2.12  | 0.93| 1.94    | 0.88    | <.001| .046 |
| Behavioral issues              | 10.4    | 1.76  | 0.97| 1.72    | 0.98    | <.001| .023 |

Table 3. Age, Marital Status and Number of Children Effects in Study 2.

| Factors                        | Age | Marital status | Number of children |
|--------------------------------|-----|----------------|-------------------|
|                                | p-value | \( \eta^2 \) | p-value | \( \eta^2 \) | p-value | \( \eta^2 \) |
| Fading away enthusiasm         | .375 | .007           | .014 | .012           | .104 | .011 |
| Long work hours                | (*)  | .001           | .002 | .008           | (+)  | .024 | .009 |
| Lack of personal time and space| .201 | .008           | <.001| .020           | .277 | .007 |
| Character issues               | .266 | .008           | <.001| .020           | (+)  | .043 | .013 |
| Clinginess                     | .120 | .010           | .111 | .008           | .116 | .010 |
| Bad sex                        | (+)  | .003           | <.001| .021           | .816 | .002 |
| Infidelity and abuse           | (+)  | .019           | <.001| .013           | .982 | .000 |
| Children                       | (+)  | .003           | .002 | .009           | (+)  | .001 | .036 |
| Lack of effort                 | .155 | .018           | <.001| .029           | .233 | .016 |
| Social circle issues           | (+)  | .036           | <.001| .016           | .466 | .004 |
| Not monogamous                 | .639 | .005           | <.001| .022           | .553 | .006 |
| Behavioral issues              | (-)  | .006           | .009 | .008           | (+)  | .019 | .011 |

Note. The sign inside the parenthesis next to the p-value indicates the direction of the relationship.

\*a significant effect of age with a negative sign was found for the “I do not have much time available for my partner” item, and a similar effect with a positive sign for the “I spend many hours working” item.
Discussion

In the current research, we have identified 78 difficulties in keeping and intimate relationships, and we have classified them in 12 broader factors. We have also found that enthusiasm and romantic feelings fading away quickly, along with long work hours and lack of personal time and space, were considered as the most important factors causing difficulties to people in keeping an intimate relationship. In addition, almost 70% of the participants indicated that at least one factor, and 41% indicated that three or more factors, caused them difficulties. Significant sex, age marital status and number of children effects were found for most of the factors.

The mismatch between ancestral and modern conditions is likely to account for many of the factors that have emerged here. In more detail, in the ancestral context, enthusiasm and intense romantic feelings would motivate people to start a relationship, and they are expected to reside as the relationship progresses. In a pre-industrial context, the support, protection and subsistence benefits would take over, providing the incentive to people to keep the relationship. The absence of these factors in the post-industrial context, makes the fading away of enthusiasm and romantic feelings impairing for keeping a relationship, as people lose the incentive to do so.

In the same vein, because in the ancestral context the benefits from having a family largely outweighed the costs of having unpleasant personality traits, positive selection forces would be relatively weak on personality traits that make an individual more pleasant as a partner. Thus, in the context of romantic relationships, several people today, are not easygoing, are selfish, insecure, clingy and aggressive, traits, which impair their capacity to keep an intimate relationship since their partners are not very willing to overlook them. For instance, being physically aggressive is not tolerated in the contemporary context where individual rights are well-protected and women are not dependent on their partners, having thus the opposite effect: Women would most likely walk away from an abusive partner. Furthermore, in ancestral human societies, people lived in extended families, meaning that they had many people around which could help them with raising their children (Hrdy, 2008). In post-industrial societies, people usually live on their own, away from their families, and they have to bear themselves the bulk of the demands for raising their children. Thus, selection forces may not have adequately prepared them to do so and keeping at the same time an intimate relationship.

The factors that we have identified in the present study, reflect also conflict between the sexes. People adopt a mixed mating strategy that involves extra-pair relationships in order to increase their own at the expense of their partners’ fitness. Accordingly, as it can be seen in the “Infidelity and abuse” factor, a partner’s adoption of such strategy makes keeping the relationship difficult. Although conceptually distinct, being physically abusive loaded to the same factor as infidelity. One possible explanation is that, a male extra-pair infidelity may be coupled with physical aggression, a strategy which, in an ancestral context, could have prevented women from walking away from their unfaithful partners. The conflict between the sexes is also reflected in factors such as “Long work hours”: Being more wealthy and successful could enable individuals, especially men, to attract higher mate value long-term partners or a higher number of casual ones. In effect, people may overemphasize on their careers in order to achieve status and wealth, neglecting their current partner.

The extracted factors reflect also the adoption of a short-term mating strategy. This is more obvious in the “Not monogamous” factor, where people indicated that they were not monogamous, and as a consequence, they tended to have unsatisfactory sexual lives when they stay long in a relationship, and for this reason tend to break up easily. This factor is also reflected in the “Fading away enthusiasm”: In order to be able to adopt a short-term mating strategy, people’s romantic feelings are expected to be intense when they meet a new partner, but to reside quickly, motivating them to look for other partners. Such calibration of behavioral mechanisms would prevent people from keeping an intimate relationship.

Sex-differences were found in almost all factors, suggesting that men and women differed in how important they considered the various difficulties. As it was originally predicted, men would be more likely to adopt a short-term and a mixed mating strategy, which would cause them difficulties in keeping an intimate relationship. These difficulties were reflected in the “Not monogamous” and the “Infidelity and abuse” factors. They were also reflected in the “Fading away enthusiasm” and the “Lack of personal time and space” factors, where men gave significantly higher scores than women. For instance, as discussed in the introduction, men’s enthusiasm may fade away quickly, so that they could move on to the next partner. Also, in order to be able to have multiple partners, men would prefer to have more freedom of movement, and less control by a partner, and these preferences reflect on the “Lack of personal time and space.” As indicated by the effect size, the largest sex-difference was found for the “Lack of effort,” which also reflects this issue as items such as “My sexual interest for my partner soon fades away” loaded there. This factor may also reflect the different evolutionary histories of men and women: During most of evolutionary time, men monopolized women by force, so they may not have evolved to have high empathy and understanding of their partners’ needs.

Significant age effects were found for several factors. As indicated by the effect size, the largest difference was for the “Bad sex” and the “Long work hours” factors. Starting from the former, older participants gave higher scores than younger
ones. One possible explanation is that, the more time people spend in a relationship, the more likely it is for them to get bored having sex with the same partner. Age in this case probably acts as a proxy of the length of the relationship, with older participants being more likely to be longer in an intimate relationship than younger participants. With respect to the “Long work hours” factor, we found that older participants spent more time working and less time allocating to the partners than younger participants. One possible explanation is that, as people get older, they are more likely to advance in their careers, and have then to spend more hours working and fewer hours being with their partners.

We also found that participants who had more children gave higher scores for difficulties such as their children absorbing most of their time and energy than participants with fewer or no children. This is expected, as people would allocate less resources in child-rearing and would be less likely to disagree with their partners on how to raise their daughters and sons, if they had few or no children than if they had several children. We also found that, participants who were single and divorced, gave significantly higher scores in most factors than participants who were married and in a relationship. One possible interpretation of this finding is that, individuals who experienced more difficulties, were more likely not to be in a relationship than individuals who experienced fewer difficulties. For instance, people who did not make considerable effort to keep a relationship, were not monogamous, and they felt that a relationship constrained them, were less likely to keep an intimate relationship than people who made considerable effort, were monogamous and they did not feel that a relationship constrained them. Future research needs to investigate this finding further.

The means for all factors were below the middle of the scale (i.e., “3”), suggesting that each one on its own was not causing people considerable difficulties in keeping a relationship. Yet, each mean was accompanied by a relatively large standard deviation, indicating that there was considerable variation in these difficulties, with some people finding them very constraining and others not constraining at all. On the basis of these findings, we can argue that people will experience severe difficulties in keeping a relationship when more than one factors is present. For instance, if people are quirky, have a taste for sexual variation, and lose their enthusiasm quickly, they will face severe difficulties in keeping a relationship, but people who are say only quirky, may manage to do so more smoothly. Of course, the outcome depends also on the severity of the problem; if people are for instance extremely quirky, they will face severe difficulties in keeping a relationship even in the absence of other difficulties.

As discussed above, the difficulties that people face in keeping an intimate relationship could lead to divorce. Such difficulties could cause the termination of the relationship long before it reaches the point of marriage, leading people to remain single. They may also prolong the spells of singlehood, because people who face such difficulties may have bad experiences from being in a relationship, which could demotivate them from looking to establish new ones. Actually, one study asked participants to indicate the reasons why they were single, and found that bad experiences from previous relationships was a common reason (Apostolou, 2017b). Accordingly, studying the difficulties in keeping intimate relationships is necessary for developing interventions that could enable people to maintain an intimate relationship. A proper theoretical framework for understanding these difficulties is key for this endeavor to succeed. For instance, the evolutionary theoretical framework, developed in the current paper, indicates that most of these difficulties arise from behavioral mechanisms not being well-adapted to the modern conditions rather than from behavioral mechanisms being broken. That is, in most cases of people facing difficulties in keeping an intimate relationship, there is not an underlying pathology. In turn, possible interventions should not aim to identify and “cure” a pathology, but to enable instead people to address the limitations of their behavioral adaptations, and function better in the contemporary environment.

Our research is not without limitations. To begin with, our results were based on self-report data that are subject to several biases. In particular, people may not have an accurate perception of what causes them difficulties in keeping an intimate relationship. For instance, people may fail to recognize that they are clingy, which in turn, makes keeping a relationship difficult. Furthermore, we employed a non-probability sample, so our findings cannot be readily generalized to the population. Also, although we have employed a combination of qualitative research methods in order to identify the reasons which caused people difficulties in keeping an intimate relationship, we may not have captured all of them. Moreover, the importance ascribed to these reasons may vary with the cultural context, which indicates that cross-cultural research is required for examining cultural variation. In addition, our study is explorative and was based one sample. Consequently, the next step in this research should be to employ these results and systematically develop a theoretically-driven measure, with carefully generated items, a good and a priori specified factor structure, and good measurement properties. Finally yet importantly, we did not control for sexual orientation. Given the relatively low prevalence of homosexuality and bisexuality (LeVay, 2010), we expect that our sample was predominantly heterosexual. Accordingly, our findings may not generalize to non-heterosexual individuals.

The plethora of reasons and factors that we have identified in the current research, testify to the complexity of the phenomenon. Such complexity suggests that our work is insufficient for fully understanding the difficulties that people face in keeping an intimate relationship. It should be considered thus, as the first of the many studies which are required to understand this fascinating phenomenon.
Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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