

# Men Seek Social Standing, Women Seek Companionship: Sex Differences in Deriving Self-Worth From Relationships

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## Abstract

Do men base their self-worth on relationships less than do women? In an assessment of lay beliefs, men and women alike indicated that men are less reliant on relationships as a source of self-worth than are women (Study 1). Yet relationships may make a different important contribution to the self-esteem of men. Men reported basing their self-esteem on their own relationship status (whether or not they were in a relationship) more than did women, and this link was statistically mediated by the perceived importance of relationships as a source of social standing (Studies 1 and 2). Finally, when relationship status was threatened, men displayed increased social-standing concerns, whereas women displayed increased interdependence concerns (Study 3). Together, these findings demonstrate that both men and women rely on relationships for self-worth, but that they derive self-esteem from relationships in different ways.

## Keywords

interpersonal relationships, self-esteem, sex differences

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The research literature leaves little doubt that men tend to be autonomous and independent, whereas women tend to be communal and interdependent (Bakan, 1966; Eagly, 1987; Markus & Kitayama, 1991). Similarly, popular culture maintains that men—relative to women—place little stock in their relationships. Instead, men are thought to invest their self-worth in other domains, such as their careers. Witness, for example, the workaholic husband whose single-minded devotion to his career leads him to compromise his relationship with his family. Despite the pervasiveness of this stereotype, however, some evidence paints a very different picture. Consider that the mental health of men is more strongly linked to relationship status than is the mental health of women (Gove, Hughes, & Style, 1983), and that when couples encounter difficulties, men cling to their partner even as women head out the door (Kitson, 1982). In this article, we strive to reconcile these seemingly conflicting lines of research by showing that both men and women value their relationships—but for different reasons. That is, whereas women

value relationships as a source of belonging and intimacy, men value relationships as a marker of social standing. To set the stage for our empirical research, we review research on gender differences in self-construal.

## Gender Differences in Self-Construal

Considerable evidence suggests that men are more independent than women and women are more interdependent than men (Cross & Madson, 1997). For example, men typically view themselves as distinct from other people, whereas women are more inclined to view themselves as embedded in important relationships (i.e., relational interdependence; Markus & Kitayama, 1991). Similarly, men tie their self-worth to separation and

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independence from other people, and women link their self-worth to connection and interdependence with other people (Josephs, Markus, & Tafarodi, 1992). As part of women's relationally interdependent focus, they are more likely than men to recall emotionally salient, relationship-relevant events, and to provide assistance to people who are close to them (Gabriel & Gardner, 1999). Similarly, women—more than men—tend to engage in relationship-maintenance behaviors, especially when faced with attractive alternatives (Lydon, 1999). Together, these findings contribute to the conclusion that men define themselves by their close relationships less than do women (Cross & Madson, 1997).

Nevertheless, some researchers have argued that many people have overemphasized the emotional aspects of relationships (e.g., connection and intimacy), while neglecting the instrumental aspects of relationships (e.g., instrumental help). As a result, cultural images of love have taken on feminine qualities, including tenderness, emotions, and weakness—in essence, *feminizing* love (Cancian, 1986). Likewise, the feminization of love has led researchers to focus more on companionate than on instrumental aspects of relationships, particularly when addressing gender differences in the importance of relationships. The result has been a tendency to overlook the capacity of relationships to serve as a source of social standing or achievement, which can fulfill autonomy needs, particularly for men. This oversight may have hindered researchers in understanding the importance of relationships to the self-construals of men.

Existing scales assessing relationship self-construal focus singularly on connection and identification with the partner (e.g., relationship-interdependent self-construal: Cross, Bacon, & Morris, 2000; relationship-contingent self-esteem: Knee, Canevello, Bush, & Cook, 2008). These scales highlight how internal aspects of relationships (partner identities and relationship quality, respectively) inform self-construals. Nevertheless, a recently developed scale measures the extent to which people base their identities on *relationship status*. The Relationship Contingency of Self-Worth Scale (RELCSW; Sanchez & Kwang, 2007) grew out of the contingencies-of-self-worth (CSW) perspective (Crocker & Wolfe, 2001), which posits that people's self-worth depends on their success in domains important to them.

The RELCSW (Sanchez & Kwang, 2007) extended the previously identified CSW domains to include romantic relationships, specifically, by focusing on the degree to which people base their self-worth on having a relationship. What is unique about this scale, therefore, is that it measures the degree to which respondents base their self-esteem not on unique qualities of the partner or the relationship, but simply on the status of being in a relationship. Because relationship status may serve as a perceivable marker of social standing, the RELCSW should

be able to capture the extent to which individuals base their self-worth on the social standing they draw from their relationships. This reasoning suggests that individuals who are prone to emphasize autonomy and social standing (i.e., men) should score higher on this scale than those who emphasize connectedness and interdependence (i.e., women). We tested this and other possibilities in our research.

## Overview of the Studies

In three studies, we aimed to test the notion that, contrary to popular belief, men derive crucial psychological benefits from relationships just as women do. Our studies used correlational, meta-analytical, and experimental designs. We first examined lay theories regarding what men and women derive from relationships and actual gender differences in basing self-worth on relationship status, controlling for gender differences in relationship-interdependent self-construal and relationship-contingent self-esteem (Study 1). We also tested the notion that men, more than women, value relationships as a marker of social standing (Study 1). We then replicated the gender difference in the importance of relationship status for self-worth across multiple, independent samples (Study 2). Finally, we tested whether threats to relationship status would increase concerns regarding social standing for men and concerns regarding connection for women (Study 3).

## Study 1

In Study 1, we solicited participants' stereotypes regarding the degree to which men and women base their self-worth on relationships, as well as the extent to which men and women rely on their relationship status as a source of self-esteem. We hypothesized that lay beliefs would suggest that men base their self-worth on relationships less than do women, but that men would report basing self-esteem on relationship status more than would women, even when we controlled for gender differences in relationship-interdependent self-construal and relationship-contingent self-esteem. Furthermore, we explored whether men, compared with women, would rate social standing as a more important factor in deciding whether to stay in or leave their current relationship, and whether the perceived importance of relationship status as a marker of social standing would statistically mediate the link between gender and basing self-worth on relationship status.

## Method

**Participants.** Through Amazon's Mechanical Turk, we recruited 285 participants (114 men, 171 women) who

were currently in relationships. We paid each person \$0.25 for participating. The sample's mean age was 30.8 years ( $SD = 9.96$ ). About half (59.3%) of the participants were in dating relationships; the rest (40.7%) were married.

**Measures of lay beliefs.** To measure lay beliefs, we asked participants to rate the degree to which they believe men base their self-worth on various aspects of relationships and the degree to which they believe women base their self-worth on various aspects of relationships. Responses were made on 7-point Likert scales (1 = *not at all*, 7 = *very much so*). Two items focused on basing self-esteem on relationship status ("In general, how much do you think men and women base their self-esteem on being in a relationship?"; "In general how much do you think men and women base their self-esteem on the ability to attract a romantic partner?"). Two additional items focused on basing self-esteem on relationship quality and connection ("In general, how much do you think men and women base their self-esteem on the quality of their relationships?"; "In general, how much do you think men and women base their self-esteem on the connection and intimacy experienced in their relationships?"). Each pair of items was closely associated ( $\alpha = .64$  and  $.75$ , respectively), so we were justified in combining the first pair into a status scale and the second pair into a connection scale.

**Measures of self-construal.** Participants then completed the RELCSW (Sanchez & Kwang, 2007). On 7-point Likert scales (1 = *strongly disagree*, 7 = *strongly agree*), they indicated the extent to which they based their self-esteem on relationship status. Items included "When I have a significant other, my self-esteem increases," and "I feel worthwhile when I have a significant other." Participants also completed the Relationship Interdependent Self-Construal Scale (RISC; Cross et al., 2000), which was adapted to measure how much participants generally included romantic partners in their self-construal (e.g., "I think one of the most important parts of who I am can be

captured by looking at my romantic partner and understanding who he or she is"),<sup>1</sup> and the Relationship-Contingent Self-Esteem Scale (RCSE; Knee et al., 2008), which measures how much individuals base their self-worth on the quality of their relationships (e.g., "I feel better about myself when it seems like my partner and I are emotionally connected").

**Importance of relationship benefits.** To index the degree to which participants valued various relationship benefits, we had them read the following passage:

Romantic relationships often provide us with different types of benefits. For example, they can alleviate feelings of loneliness, be a source of connection and companionship, increase social standing, or provide validation. Imagine you are considering whether or not to continue your romantic relationship. Please indicate how much each factor or benefit would influence your decision to stay in or leave that relationship.

Participants then rated the degree to which they believed five factors (loneliness, social standing, societal pressures, connection, and intimacy) would influence their decision to stay in or leave their relationship. Responses were made on a 7-point Likert scale (1 = *not at all*, 7 = *very much so*).

## Results and discussion

Tables 1, 2, and 3 provide descriptive statistics and intercorrelations.

**Lay beliefs.** Paired  $t$  tests compared beliefs about the degree to which women and men base their self-esteem on relationship status and the degree to which they base their self-esteem on relationship quality and connection. As predicted, participants believed that men base their self-esteem on relationship status less than women do,  $t(273) = 12.38$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $d = 1.50$ , and also that men base

**Table 1.** Study 1: Descriptive Statistics for Lay Theories on the Degree to Which Men and Women Base Their Self-Worth on Relationship Status and Connection

Variable	Beliefs about men			Beliefs about women		
	$M (SD)$	Range		$M (SD)$	Range	
		Potential	Actual		Potential	Actual
Status	4.76 (1.18)	1–7	1.0–7.0	5.71 (1.04)	1–7	1.5–7.0
Connection	4.29 (1.32)	1–7	1.0–7.0	5.63 (0.99)	1–7	1.5–7.0

Note: Beliefs about men differed significantly from beliefs about women among both male and female participants,  $ts(112-163) > 5.77$ ,  $ps < .001$ .

**Table 2.** Study 1: Descriptive Statistics for Self-Construals and the Importance of Relationship Benefits

Variable	Men				Women			
	<i>M</i> ( <i>SD</i> )	Range		$\alpha$	<i>M</i> ( <i>SD</i> )	Range		$\alpha$
		Potential	Actual			Potential	Actual	
Self-construal								
RELCSW <sup>a</sup>	4.44 (1.03)	1–7	1.8–6.5	.69	4.14 (1.36)	1–7	1.0–7.0	.82
RISC	5.10 (0.91)	1–7	2.7–7.0	.87	5.16 (1.01)	1–7	1.6–7.0	.89
RCSE	5.11 (0.85)	1–7	2.9–6.6	.85	5.09 (1.05)	1–7	1.3–7.0	.88
Relationship benefits								
Loneliness	4.59 (1.88)	1–7	1.0–7.0		4.62 (1.88)	1–7	1.0–7.0	
Social standing <sup>a</sup>	3.03 (1.59)	1–7	1.0–7.0		2.59 (1.63)	1–7	1.0–7.0	
Social pressure	2.86 (1.68)	1–7	1.0–7.0		2.69 (1.71)	1–7	1.0–7.0	
Connection	5.56 (1.20)	1–7	1.0–7.0		5.75 (1.44)	1–7	1.0–7.0	
Intimacy	5.65 (1.37)	1–7	1.0–7.0		5.78 (1.50)	1–7	1.0–7.0	

Note: RELCSW = Relationship Contingency of Self-Worth Scale (Sanchez & Kwang, 2007); RISC = Relationship Interdependent Self-Construal Scale (Cross, Bacon, & Morris, 2000); RCSE = Relationship-Contingent Self-Esteem Scale (RCSE; Knee, Canevello, Bush, & Cook, 2008).

<sup>a</sup>Men and women differed significantly on these variables.

their self-esteem on relationship quality and connection less than women do,  $t(272) = 16.52, p < .001, d = 2.00$ .

**Gender differences in self-construal.** We expected that men would base their self-esteem on relationship status more than would women (RELCSW) but that men would not score higher than women on relationship-interdependent self-construal (RISC) or relationship-contingent self-esteem (RCSE). To test these possibilities, we ran a multivariate analysis of covariance (MANCOVA) with gender as the predictor and RELCSW, RISC, and RCSE scores as the dependent variables. We controlled for age, relationship status, and number of children,

removing variables using backward elimination. As predicted, men scored higher on the RELCSW than women,  $F(1, 273) = 4.24, p = .040, d = 0.25$ .<sup>2</sup> No gender differences were found for the RISC,  $F(1, 273) = 0.03, p = .874, d = 0.02$ , or the RCSE,  $F(1, 273) = 0.20, p = .657, d = 0.05$ . Therefore, men reported basing their self-worth on relationship status—but not on other aspects of relationships—more than did women.

**Gender difference in the importance of social standing.** To compare participants' ratings of the importance of various relationship benefits in deciding whether to stay in or leave their current relationship,

**Table 3.** Study 1: Intercorrelations Among the Variables

Measure	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
Lay theories									
1. Relationship status	—								
2. Connection	.65***	—							
Relationship self-construals									
3. RELCSW	.21***	.23**	—						
4. RISC	.23***	.38**	.46***	—					
5. RCSE	.21**	.25**	.56***	.76***	—				
Importance of relationship factors									
6. Loneliness	.01	.05	.24***	.16**	.15*	—			
7. Social standing	.05	.09	.23***	.02	-.01	.07	—		
8. Societal pressures	.07	.09	.22***	.05	.04	.11 <sup>†</sup>	.79***	—	
9. Connection	.18**	.28***	.20**	.36***	.34***	.33***	-.14*	-.08	—
10. Intimacy	.18**	.30***	.23***	.34***	.36***	.38***	-.09	-.07	.75***

Note: RELCSW = Relationship Contingency of Self-Worth Scale (Sanchez & Kwang, 2007); RISC = Relationship Interdependent Self-Construal Scale (Cross, Bacon, & Morris, 2000); RCSE = Relationship-Contingent Self-Esteem Scale (RCSE; Knee, Canevello, Bush, & Cook, 2008).

<sup>†</sup> $p < .10$ , two-tailed. \* $p < .05$ , two-tailed. \*\* $p < .01$ , two-tailed. \*\*\* $p < .001$ , two-tailed.

we ran a MANCOVA with gender as the predictor and ratings for the five relationship benefits as the dependent variables. We controlled for age, relationship status, and number of children, removing variables using backward elimination. Compared with women, men reported that social standing was a more important relationship benefit,  $F(1, 268) = 5.73, p = .017, d = 0.29$ . No gender differences emerged for any of the other relationship benefits,  $F_s < 1.67, p_s < .198, d_s < 0.16$ .

**Social standing as a mediator between gender and basing self-esteem on relationship status.** To test for statistical mediation, we relied on a nonparametric bootstrapping analysis (see Preacher & Hayes, 2004). Specifically, we tested whether the rated importance of social standing statistically mediated the link between gender and RELCSW scores. Results based on 1,000 bootstrapped samples indicated that the value participants placed on the social standing derived from relationships mediated the link between gender and RELCSW scores,  $\beta = 0.075, SE = 0.04, p = .046, 95\%$  confidence interval =  $[0.0018, 0.1490]$ .

## Study 2

To examine the generalizability of our conclusions regarding the tendency for men to endorse basing their self-worth on relationship status more than women, we conducted a meta-analysis of data from four new samples and two previously published data sets. We hypothesized that men would consistently score higher on the RELCSW than would women.

## Method

Sample 1 consisted of undergraduates (87 men, 109 women) at the University of Michigan, who participated as part of a larger study for partial course credit. This sample's mean age was 18.8 years ( $SD = 0.98$ ). Sixty-nine participants were currently in relationships ( $M = 1.27$  years,  $SD = 0.97$ ).

Sample 2 was an Internet sample (38 men, 85 women) recruited by posting messages in more than 100 Yahoo groups, requesting volunteers to complete a study about romantic relationships. Participants were not compensated. This sample's mean age was 36.3 years ( $SD = 11.6$ ). Eighty-four participants were currently in relationships ( $M = 6.64$  years,  $SD = 9.3$ ).

Sample 3 consisted of heterosexual dating couples ( $N = 91$ ) from Austin, Texas, who participated as part of a larger study in return for a chance to receive a \$25 cash prize. Couples were recruited through ads in the local newspaper, Facebook, and Craigslist. This sample's mean age was 22.49 years ( $SD = 2.65$ ). The mean relationship length was 2.04 years ( $SD = 1.7$ ).

Sample 4 consisted of online participants (93 men, 148 women) recruited through Amazon's Mechanical Turk as part of a larger study. Participants were paid \$0.30 for completing the entire study. The mean age of this sample was 31.9 years ( $SD = 10.0$ ). All participants were currently in relationships ( $M = 6.76$  years,  $SD = 7.72$ ).

Participants in all four samples completed the RELCSW (Sanchez & Kwang, 2007), which was embedded in a packet of questionnaires. The scale was reliable ( $\alpha_s = .74-.86$ ).

## Results and discussion

To calculate gender differences in RELCSW scores, for Samples 1, 2, and 4, we conducted independent  $t$  tests with gender as the predictor and RELCSW score as the outcome. For Sample 3, we ran a paired  $t$  test to account for dependency within couples. Overall, men tended to report basing self-esteem on relationship status more than women did,  $t_s(90-333) \geq 2.12, p_s < .05$  (see Table 4).

To obtain a more comprehensive picture of the magnitude of the gender difference, we conducted a meta-analysis of the data from these four samples plus two previous studies (Park, Sanchez, & Brynildsen, 2011; Study 3 in Sanchez, Good, Kwang, & Saltzman, 2008). Both of the previous studies examined undergraduates from an East Coast university. The mean effect size

**Table 4.** Study 2: Gender Differences on the RELCSW, Corrected for Sampling Error

Sample	Males		Females		Gender difference	
	<i>n</i>	<i>M</i> ( <i>SD</i> )	<i>n</i>	<i>M</i> ( <i>SD</i> )	<i>t</i> test	Cohen's <i>d</i>
Sample 1	87	4.25 (0.88)	109	3.78 (1.2)	$t(192.66) = 3.18^{**}$	0.46
Sample 2	38	4.11 (1.1)	85	3.50 (1.1)	$t(121) = 2.84^{**}$	0.52
Sample 3	91	3.99 (1.2)	91	3.48 (1.1)	$t(90) = 3.77^{***}$	0.39
Sample 4	93	4.15 (1.0)	148	3.83 (1.2)	$t(219.05) = 2.12^*$	0.29
Sanchez, Good, Kwang, & Saltzman (2008, Study 3)	128	4.12 (1.1)	207	3.96 (1.1)	$t(333) = 1.31$	0.14
Park, Sanchez, & Brynildsen (2011)	66	3.82 (1.3)	245	3.57 (1.3)	$t(309) = 1.34$	0.15

Note: Mean Cohen's  $d$  across the six samples was 0.28. RELCSW = Relationship Contingency of Self-Worth Scale (Sanchez & Kwang, 2007).

\* $p < .05$ , two-tailed. \*\* $p < .01$ , two-tailed. \*\*\* $p < .001$ , two-tailed.



(Cohen's  $d$ ) across all studies was 0.28,  $p = .001$  (see Table 4).<sup>3</sup> These results indicated that, overall, men reported basing their self-esteem on relationship status more than did women.

### Study 3

Studies 1 and 2 demonstrated that men reported basing their self-esteem on relationship status more than did women, despite stereotypic assumptions to the contrary. Study 1 further demonstrated that this link may exist because men, more than women, value relationships as a source of social standing. In Study 3, we tested whether this finding extends beyond self-report evidence. Specifically, we tested whether a perceived threat to relationship status in the form of a breakup will trigger concerns about social standing for men but concerns about being connected to the partner for women. To test this hypothesis, we analyzed language use while participants imagined a relationship-related negative event (a breakup) or a relationship-irrelevant negative event (a dental visit).

Our focus on language analysis was based on the assumption that people's word choices reflect their priorities, intentions, and thoughts (see Tausczik & Pennebaker, 2010). A study on the September 11 attacks, for example, revealed that word usage reflected people's increase in negative emotions and desire for social connections (Cohn, Mehl, & Pennebaker, 2004). Likewise, we argue that as social standing or connection concerns increase, people's use of words relating to social standing or connection also will increase. We expected that whereas men contemplating a breakup would be particularly likely to use social-standing words, women contemplating a breakup would be especially inclined to use connection words (see Cross & Madson, 1997).

### Method

**Participants.** We recruited 173 heterosexual participants (70 male, 103 female) who were currently in romantic relationships (mean age = 19.5 years,  $SD = 2.1$ ; mean relationship length = 1.3 years,  $SD = 1.2$ , range = 1 month–5 years). Eighteen participants (13 male, 5 female) did not follow instructions (e.g., they wrote about their relationships in the control condition) and were removed from the sample, which left a final sample of 57 men and 98 women.

**Procedure.** To control for baseline relationship concerns, we had participants complete the UCLA Loneliness Scale (Version 3) prior to their arrival at the lab (Russell, 1996). We randomly assigned participants to one of two conditions. In the breakup condition, we primed

participants with a relationship-breakup scenario using the following prompt:

Please imagine how your life would change if you were to break-up with your partner in the near future. For the next five minutes, write about whatever comes to mind. Please do not stop typing until the Experimenter cues you to stop.

In the control condition, we primed participants with a negative non-relationship-related scenario using the following prompt:

Please imagine you have an upcoming appointment to the dentist. For the next five minutes, write about whatever comes to mind. Please do not stop typing until the Experimenter cues you to stop.

Participants wrote for 5 min following the prompt.

**Linguistic analysis strategy.** We analyzed each writing sample for words that signified connection, social standing, or, as a manipulation check, negative emotion. To do this, we used the Linguistic Inquiry and Word Count program (LIWC2007; Pennebaker, Chung, Ireland, Gonzales, & Booth, 2007). LIWC2007 provides a default dictionary for coding usage of social-standing words (e.g., *earn, achieve, win*) and negative-emotion words (e.g., *hurt, ugly, nasty*). LIWC2007 also provides a dictionary for “we” words (e.g., *we, us, our*), which are widely accepted as a marker of relationship interdependence (Agnew, Van Lange, Rusbult, & Langston, 1998). An independent-samples  $t$  test confirmed that usage of negative-emotion words did not differ between the breakup condition ( $M = 2.4$ ,  $SD = 1.6$ ) and the control condition ( $M = 2.5$ ,  $SD = 1.7$ ),  $t(171) = 0.54$ ,  $p = .59$ ,  $d = 0.05$ .

### Results and discussion

See Table 5 for descriptive statistics for this study. We conducted a 2 (gender: male, female)  $\times$  2 (condition: breakup, control) MANCOVA on the percentage of social-standing and connection words in the writing samples while controlling for demographic variables (i.e., age and relationship length), as well as baseline loneliness, removing each variable through backward elimination.

**Social-standing words.** As predicted, there was a significant interaction between gender and condition,  $F(1, 146) = 4.01$ ,  $p = .05$ ,  $d = 0.32$  (see Fig. 1). A planned comparison indicated that men in the breakup condition were more likely to use social-standing words than were men in the control condition and women in either condition,  $t(31.41) = 4.23$ ,  $p < .01$ ,  $d = 0.16$ . Men were also

**Table 5.** Study 3: Descriptive Statistics

Variable	Men				Women			
	<i>M</i> ( <i>SD</i> )	Range		$\alpha$	<i>M</i> ( <i>SD</i> )	Range		$\alpha$
		Potential	Actual			Potential	Actual	
Loneliness	2.15 (0.55)	0–3	1.0–3.0	.89	2.05 (0.58)	0–3	0.33–3.0	.90
Social-standing words (%)	1.59 (1.3)	0–100	0.0–5.1		1.29 (0.93)	0–100	0.0–4.5	
Connection words (%)	0.71 (1.2)	0–100	0.0–4.6		1.25 (1.7)	0–100	0.0–6.9	

Note: Loneliness was measured with the UCLA Loneliness Scale (Russell, 1996).

more likely to use social-standing words when primed with thoughts of a relationship breakup than when primed with thoughts of a negative relationship-irrelevant event (dental appointment).

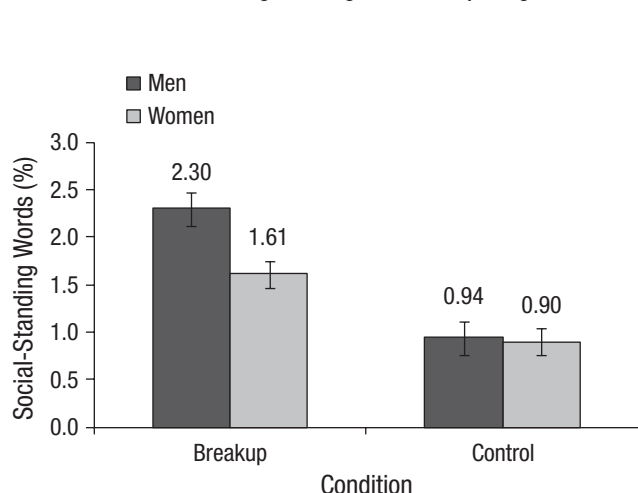
**Connection words.** Gender and condition also had a significant interaction effect on usage of connection words,  $F(1, 146) = 4.01$ ,  $p = .05$ ,  $d = 0.35$  (see Fig. 2). A planned comparison indicated that women in the breakup condition were more likely to use connection words than were women in the control condition and men in either condition,  $t(66.64) = 5.80$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $d = 0.34$ . Women were also more likely to use connection words when primed with thoughts of a relationship breakup than when primed with thoughts of a negative relationship-irrelevant event.

## General Discussion

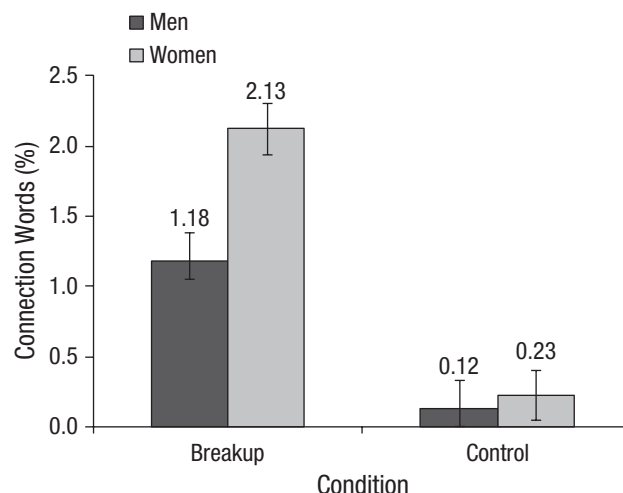
To a striking degree, love is currently feminized, a trend that has led researchers and laypersons alike to emphasize interdependent aspects of relationships over instrumental ones. This emphasis presumably explains why

participants in Study 1 asserted that men derive their self-worth from relationships to a lesser degree than women. Nevertheless, a very different picture emerged when we asked the same participants from Study 1, as well as multiple samples of participants in Study 2, if they themselves based their self-worth on instrumental aspects of relationships, such as social standing. In particular, men indicated that they based their self-worth on relationship status more than women did, and men viewed relationships as a source of social standing more than women did. Finally, when participants in Study 3 were primed with thoughts of a breakup, their language use suggested that men were concerned with their social standing, whereas women were concerned about the loss of a connection to their former partner.

Our findings may shed some light on why men are less sensitive to marital distress than are women (Gaelick, Bodenhausen, & Wyer, 1985; Kiecolt-Glaser & Newton, 2001; Ross & Holmberg, 1990), and why men are less likely to voice discontent with their marriages than are women (Hagestad & Smyer, 1982; Harvey, Wells, &



**Fig. 1.** Usage of social-standing words in Study 3 as a function of gender and condition. Error bars represent 95% confidence intervals.



**Fig. 2.** Usage of connection words in Study 3 as a function of gender and condition. Error bars represent 95% confidence intervals.

Alvarez, 1978). Apparently, for men, being in a relationship communicates social standing regardless of relationship quality, and so men may be less concerned with the emotional tenor of their relationships, and less likely to leave an unsatisfying relationship. Yet, although men may be relatively unconcerned with the quality of the connections they have with their partners, they are concerned with maintaining their relationships status. Indeed, they should be, as there is evidence that being in a stable relationship is beneficial to men. For example, married men are perceived as more competent than single men (Etaugh & Riley, 1983), and married men tend to earn higher performance ratings and incomes than their unmarried counterparts (Akerlof, 1998; Korenman & Neumark, 1991).

Our studies had several strengths in their methodology and design, which enhances our confidence in the results. First, we used correlational, meta-analytical, and experimental data to test our hypothesis. Second, we replicated our findings using participants from diverse groups and regional areas. Finally, we used both self-report and implicit measures to examine important relationship variables.

Despite these strengths, it is possible that the relative youth of our participants (the highest mean age was 36) led us to draw conclusions that are not representative of the larger population. For example, older men tend to command more respect than younger men regardless of their relationship status, so older men may be less concerned with relationships as a source of self-worth. Conversely, older women may derive self-worth from relationship status more than younger women do, as never-married women tend to be viewed with increasing negativity as they age (DePaulo & Morris, 2005; Sharp & Ganong, 2011). Although Study 1 did not find a significant interaction between age and gender, future studies should examine the effects of age using a sample including older participants. Likewise, future studies should focus on nonheterosexual populations and other types of close relationships (e.g., friendships). Finally, to assess whether concerns about social standing were related to relationship status, we used a breakup scenario exclusively. Future studies should explore people's reasons for entering in a relationship (possibly using a speed-dating paradigm) to assess whether social-standing concerns influence people's choice to enter in a romantic relationship the same way that such concerns influence people's reactions to relationship dissolution.

Still, these studies are among the first to investigate how men and women may derive self-worth from their relationships differently. These studies also highlight the importance of examining relationships as a source of social standing, particularly for men. Perhaps men are more likely than women to increase status-striving behaviors either within their relationships (e.g., dominating

their partners) or outside their relationships (e.g., working harder for a promotion at work) when faced with relationship threats. Note evidence that individuals who base their self-worth on relationship status tend to report greater obsessive pursuit of their ex-partners after a breakup (Park et al., 2011). Likewise, following a breakup, men may engage in more extreme behaviors than women to restore their relationship status. Finally, these patterns may be exaggerated in cultures that greatly emphasize males' public reputation and social standing (e.g., Southern cultures; Cohen & Nisbett, 1994).

In sum, our findings suggest that both men and women derive self-worth from their romantic relationships, but through different pathways. That is, just as relationships bolster the self-worth of men by elevating their perception of their status and achievement, relationships bolster the self-worth of women by affording them a sense of companionship and connectedness. Apparently, relationships provide men and women alike with significant benefits in the form of higher self-esteem, but the precise mechanism through which men and women realize these benefits differs dramatically.

### Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The authors declared that they had no conflicts of interest with respect to their authorship or the publication of this article.

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### Notes

1. We adapted all questions to target romantic relationships, so as to eliminate potential variance attributable to differences in types of relationships.
2. We also examined gender differences without controlling for gender differences in the other scales. Men still reported basing self-esteem on relationship status more than did women,  $t(271) = 2.03, p = .044$ .
3. The lack of significant gender differences in the previously published studies could have been due to how the RELCSW was administered. In those studies, the scale was broken apart, with individual items administered separately, which can decrease the fidelity of any measure. Although there was not a significant gender difference in those two data sets, the trend was still in the predicted direction.

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