Looking for a Family Man? Norms for Men Are Toppling in Heterosexual Relationships

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Abstract

Gender norms indicate that men should be agentic and work-oriented rather than communal and family-oriented. Yet, this traditional expectation conflicts with findings that communion is highly valued in romantic partners. Moreover, because more women in industrialized countries are pursuing careers, they may increasingly seek family-oriented partners to share the second shift of family tasks. Investigating the attractiveness of communal, family-oriented men, we show that 87 female college students in Belgium evaluate more family-oriented men as generally more attractive (Study 1) and that especially college women in Belgium with high work ambitions seek communion and family orientation in ideal partners (Study 2, $n = 224$). Lastly, women in 198 Belgian heterosexual dual-earning couples are more satisfied with their lives and experience less work and family conflict the more their partner indicates that he is oriented toward his close family (Study 3). Together, our findings outline the contextualized nature of norms and add to knowledge on norm change, showing how gender equality may be fed through romantic relationships. Moreover, our findings suggest the importance of exploring men's family orientations in couples therapy, and they call for counselors, as well as policymakers and Human Resources practitioners, to guide men in times of norm change to enable men to be family-oriented and to offer family-friendly work policies.

Keywords Gender equality · Social norms · Psychology of men · Marriage and family measures · Work-life balance · Heterosexual couples

Men, just like women, are socialized with regard to gender roles and expected to show gender-specific characteristics and behaviors (Martin and Ruble 2010). Traditionally, male gender norms (i.e., consensual beliefs and rules as to which roles and characteristics are, and should be, for men; Cialdini and Trost 1998; Eagly et al. 2000) indicate that men are, and

should be, work-oriented and agentic (e.g., assertive, competent, independent, rational) but not too family-oriented and communal (e.g., caring, warm, obedient, sensitive) (Diekmann and Eagly 2000; Mahalik et al. 2003; Meeussen et al. 2016; Prentice and Carranza 2002; Riggs 1997; Vandello and Bosson 2013). A large body of research documents these gendered expectations in terms of characteristics and their stability over time (Diekmann and Eagly 2000; Haines et al. 2016). Also, we know that gender norms are an important driving factor behind the overrepresentation of men in work-oriented roles and their underrepresentation in family-oriented roles, such as household labor and childcare (Croft et al. 2015; England 2010). This is because men who conform to gender norms experience social and personal benefits, whereas men who violate gender norms risk punishments, such as not being seen as “a real man,” being perceived as less competent and less committed, and receiving fewer work rewards (Brown and Diekmann 2010; Rudman and Mescher 2013; Theunissen et al. 2011; Vandello and Bosson 2013; Wayne and Cordeiro 2003).

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It is unclear how these gender norms play out within relationship contexts. On the one hand, research on gender differences in partner preferences shows that women, more so than men, seek a partner with work-oriented qualities whereas men, more so than women, seek a partner with family-oriented qualities; furthermore, these gender differences are more pronounced for men and women who endorse sexist beliefs (Eastwick et al. 2006; Johannesen-Schmidt and Eagly 2002). On the other hand, people generally do value communal characteristics in a long-term relationship: Both men and women seek a romantic partner who is friendly, attentive to other people's needs, sensitive, kind, and compassionate (Regan and Berscheid 1997; Regan and Joshi 2003). Moreover, research shows that gender differences in such partner preferences in terms of work and family roles are lower in countries with higher indices of gender equality (Zentner and Mitura 2012).

Women in industrialized countries are also increasingly pursuing a career and combining work and family roles (Cotter et al. 2008; England 2010). When returning from work, women generally face a second shift, spending about twice as much time on family tasks than men do (Bartley et al. 2005; Hochschild and Machung 2012). In order to be able to pursue career ambitions and reduce potential work-family conflict with subsequent negative outcomes (Allen et al. 2000), women may value a family orientation in their partner to share family tasks because partners are important in enabling each other to pursue life goals such as careers (Fitzsimons and Finkel 2010) and people are more satisfied with their partner when this partner helps them to pursue their life goals (Fitzsimons and Finkel 2011; Hofmann et al. 2015).

In the current paper, we argue that women increasingly seek partners who deviate from the normative prescriptions that men should be work-oriented and agentic and not too family-oriented and communal so that norms for men may be toppling within heterosexual romantic relationship contexts. We hypothesize that heterosexual women evaluate men more favorably as romantic partners when men are more family-oriented and communal. Moreover, we expect women to especially value family orientation and communal characteristics in partners when they themselves pursue a career because such partners can reduce women's potential conflict between work and family tasks. We investigate these expectations in three studies. First, we examine the general perceived attractiveness of men described as being more or less family-oriented. Next, we study the driving forces behind women's preference for family-oriented, communal men by predicting their partner preferences from own work- and family-orientations. Last, we investigate whether women with more family-oriented partners are more satisfied with their lives and experience lower conflict between work and family tasks.

Together, our research highlights the context-specific nature of traditional gender norms, as well as social norms more generally, and it opens new avenues toward gender equality because making salient contexts with weaker gender expectations (such as relationship contexts) may foster change in other contexts. Conversely, revealing contexts with the most strong traditional gender norms can inform targeted interventions toward social change.

Study 1

In a first study, we investigated to what extent college women perceive more or less family-oriented men as attractive romantic partners. We hypothesized (a) that more family-oriented men are perceived to be more attractive and (b) that they are perceived as more attractive because they are regarded as more communal and more able parents, even after controlling for their agency and work abilities.

Method

Participants

Participants were 87 female psychology students in Belgium who completed an online survey in exchange for course credits. Participants' mean age was 18.49 ($SD = 1.53$, range = 17–31); 82 (94.3%) identified as heterosexual, 2 as lesbian, 2 as bisexual, and one preferred not to answer this question. Fully 77 (88.5%) of the participants reported being Belgian, and 16 (17.9%) indicated that they (also) were part of another group (e.g., Dutch, Moroccan). Because we asked participants about the men others prefer, we retained the sexual minority women in our sample.

Procedure and Measures

Participants took part in an “impression formation study” in which they were asked to read a brief person description and indicate their spontaneous impression of this person (Coleman and Franiuk 2011). The vignette described a man becoming a father for the first time. Participants were randomly assigned to one of two conditions: in the high family-orientation condition ($n = 49$), the man was described as staying home longer than the legal 2-week paternal leave period; in the low family-orientation condition ($n = 38$), the man was described as going to work before the 2 weeks of legal paternal leave were over. A manipulation check which asked participants in the two groups “Compared to the standard legal period of paternal leave, how much time off did the person you read about take?,” rated on a scale from 1 (*Much less than the legal period*) to 7 (*Much more than the legal period*), confirmed that the man in the high family-orientation condition ($M =$

5.00, $SD = 1.10$) indeed was regarded as taking more paternal leave than was the target man in the low family-orientation condition ($M = 2.89$, $SD = .98$), $t(85) = -9.28$, $p < .001$, Cohen's $d = 2.03$. We made sure that the men's reasons for staying home or going back to work did not play a role by varying whether it was more or less within his control. This information did not affect perceived attractiveness nor interact with the family-work orientation. The full vignettes as presented to the participants in Dutch (with an English translation) and the analyses controlling for reasons can be found in the [online supplement](#). For each measured construct, responses were averaged into one aggregate score such that higher scores indicated higher communion, agency, attractiveness, family abilities or work abilities. Measures are described here in the same order that they were presented in the questionnaire.

Communion and Agency

Participants evaluated the extent to which seven communal characteristics (warm, sincere, benign, reliable, sensitive, helpful, and caring) and seven agentic characteristics (competent, efficient, organized, capable, ambitious, result-oriented, and enterprising) fitted the man from 1 (*Not at all*) to 7 (*Very much*) (Coleman and Franiuk 2011; Cuddy et al. 2004; Fiske et al. 2002). In line with this previous research ($\alpha_{\text{communion}} = .80-.84$ and $\alpha_{\text{agency}} = .75-.90$), internal consistency reliabilities of both the communion ($\alpha = .91$) and agency ($\alpha = .85$) scales were high in the current study.

Attractiveness

The extent to which the described man would generally be perceived as attractive was examined with two items: "How attractive do you think people find this person as a partner?" and "To what extent do you think people are attracted to this person?," rated from 1 (*Not at all*) to 7 (*Very much*). Although the first item explicitly mentions a partner and the second does not, the two items had a very high positive correlation ($r = .81$, $p < .001$), and results fully replicated using each item separately.

Family and Work Abilities

The described man's perceived family and work abilities were measured with two four-item scales by Coleman and Franiuk (2011). An example item for family abilities was "I think this person is a good parent" and for work abilities: "I think this person is good at his job," rated from 1 (*Strongly disagree*) to 7 (*Strongly agree*). Both the family ($\alpha = .96$) and work ($\alpha = .93$) abilities scales showed high internal consistency similar to Coleman and Franiuk (2011: $\alpha_{\text{family}} = .92$ and $\alpha_{\text{work}} = .92$).

Results

Means and standard deviations for all variables as well as their correlations can be found in Table 1a. The correlations show that across conditions, communion and family abilities were positively related to perceived general attractiveness, whereas agency and work abilities were not or negatively related to perceived general attractiveness respectively. Communion and family abilities were positively related, as were agency and work abilities, confirming that these characteristics strongly relate to the corresponding social roles. There was no relation between communion and agency, and family and work abilities were negatively related, showing that participants seemed to perceive either one of these abilities in the described man.

We tested our first hypothesis with an ANOVA predicting perceived general attractiveness of the man from the family orientation manipulation (high versus low). Results showed that as expected, the man who stayed with his newborn child longer than his period of legal paternal leave was perceived as generally more attractive ($M = 5.35$, $SD = 1.10$) than the man who went back to work before the period of legal paternal leave was over ($M = 4.22$, $SD = 1.33$), $F(1) = 18.44$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .18$, $R^2 = .18$. Looking further into the reasons behind this difference, we performed bootstrapping mediation analyses (5000 samples), testing first communion and agency evaluations as mediators. Results showed that the communion of the described man (indirect effect: 1.19, $SE = .20$, 95% CI: [.82, 1.60]), but not his agency (indirect effect: $-.15$, $SE = .11$, 95% CI: $[-.40, .04]$) mediated the effect of the family orientation manipulation on perceived general attractiveness. Second, we tested family and work ability evaluations as mediators. Replicating the previous results, we found that the man's family abilities (indirect effect: 1.30, $SE = .23$, 95% CI: [.92, 1.84]), but not his work abilities (indirect effect: $-.20$, $SE = .17$, 95% CI: $[-.54, .11]$) mediated the effect of the family orientation manipulation on perceived general attractiveness.

Discussion

As expected, college women in Belgium believed that others would find men who were more family-oriented more attractive because they are more communal and better parents. These findings from Study 1 thus suggest that gender norms do prescribe communion and family-orientations in relationship contexts. A strength of Study 1 is that participants within a condition all rated the same description of a man and that they evaluated his attractiveness for people in general, thus showing that participants believe the attractiveness of this man goes beyond their own personal preference. Yet, a limitation is that we did not have a neutral condition in which a father took the legal 10 days of paternity leave and then went back to work. Thus, our effect on attractiveness could be

Table 1 Descriptive statistics and correlations among variables, Studies 1–3

Variables	<i>M (SD)</i>	Correlations							
		1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
(a) Study 1									
1. Attractiveness	4.86 (1.33)	—							
2. Communion	5.14 (1.07)	.74***	—						
3. Agency	4.86 (.99)	.12	−.01	—					
4. Family abilities	5.13 (1.40)	.66***	.80***	−.25*	—				
5. Work abilities	4.93 (1.34)	−.23*	−.42***	.68***	−.49***	—			
(b) Study 2									
1. Own family orientation	6.04 (.80)	—							
2. Own work orientation	5.15 (.88)	.17*	—						
3. Expected work-family balance	4.20 (.86)	.13*	.08	—					
4. Communion ideal partner	6.03 (.70)	.40***	.21**	.22**	—				
5. Agency ideal partner	5.31 (.78)	.15*	.16*	.28***	.54***	—			
6. Family orientation ideal partner	5.75 (.86)	.55***	.24***	.20**	.45***	.25***	—		
7. Work orientation ideal partner	5.20 (.88)	.16*	.49***	.13*	.11	.32***	.12*	—	
(c) Study 3									
1. Own close family orientation	42.38 (12.04)	—							
2. Own broad family orientation	59.69 (13.24)	.79***	—						
3. Own work orientation	23.97 (11.28)	−.44***	−.70***	—					
4. Partner's close family orientation	38.74 (10.36)	.17*	.22**	−.17*	—				
5. Partner's broad family orientation	53.97 (11.77)	.13	.25**	−.16*	.77***	—			
6. Partner's work orientation	26.64 (11.92)	−.08	−.17*	.19**	−.31***	−.63***	—		
7. Life satisfaction	3.81 (.67)	.004	.01	−.03	.16*	.11	−.06	—	
8. Work-family conflict	2.61 (1.10)	−.04	−.06	.11	−.15*	−.08	.03	−.22***	—
9. Family-work conflict	2.05 (.90)	.02	−.03	−.04	−.02	−.11	.12	−.08	.22***

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

driven by increased attractiveness of the father high in family-orientation and/or decreased attractiveness of the father low in family orientation. Also, the general measure of attractiveness provides the limitation that such evaluations of general attractiveness may be susceptible to social desirability and they do not allow us to look into the processes behind partner preferences by relating them to participant's own characteristics.

Study 2

In Study 2 we therefore moved beyond women's perceptions of general attractiveness and investigated what qualities women themselves look for in an ideal partner. Investigating own partner preferences allows us to gain insight into the driving forces behind the attractiveness of communal, family-oriented men. As we indicated previously, we believe that women's own work aspirations may increase the attractiveness of communal, family-oriented men because having such a partner could decrease women's own work-family conflict. In Study 2, we therefore hypothesized (a) that the higher young college

women's own work-orientation, the more they seek communion and a family orientation in their ideal male partner and (b) that this relation will be even stronger when women expect it will be hard to combine work and family tasks. As a stringent test of these predictions, we examined these relations while controlling for women's own family orientation and the extent to which they seek agentic, work-oriented qualities in an ideal male partner.

Method

Participants

Participants were female psychology students who completed an online survey in exchange for course credits. Eleven participants were excluded because they were not heterosexual (because we were interested in ideal qualities of male partners), 21 because they did not want children (which made the family orientation measure that asks about childcare inapplicable), one because she was 39-years-old (making her ideal life and partner in 15 years very different), and 7 because they

indicated their data should not be used. The final sample consisted of 224 female participants with a mean age of 18.3 ($SD = .81$, range = 17–25). Most participants (208, 92.9%) identified as Belgian, and 25 (11.1%) indicated that they were (also) part of another group (mostly Dutch).

Procedure and Measures

Participants were asked to think about their life 15 years from now in terms of work and family roles and their ideal male partner. Initially, we intended to also manipulate the salience of work versus family identities and work-family conflict. For the identity salience manipulation, participants described what their day would look like as a mother versus at work. Yet, most participants also described their other life domain, and the groups did not differ in work or family orientations. For the work-family conflict manipulation, participants indicated the order in which they would execute six versus 20 working mother tasks, with the assumption of higher work-family conflict expectations after ranking 20 than six tasks. Yet, the groups did not differ in expected work-family conflict. In the models presented in the present paper, we therefore use the continuous measures of own work and family orientations and expected work-family balance instead of the experimental conditions. The results fully replicate when controlling for the manipulations, which have no significant effects.

Measures are described in the same order as in the questionnaire. Items were scored on a 7-point scale from 1 (*Strongly disagree*) to 7 (*Strongly agree*), unless otherwise indicated. Items were aggregated to a scale and all scales were scored such that higher averaged scores indicate more of the construct. The [online supplement](#) provide all items in Dutch (as presented to participants) along with their English translation.

Expected Work-Family Balance

The extent to which participants expected they would be able to balance work and family roles in their future was measured with three items adapted from the work-family balance scale (Hill et al. 2001): “I expect that it will be easy to balance the demands of my work and family life,” “I expect to be successful in combining my work and family life,” and “I expect that I will be able to find a good balance between work and family.” Internal consistency of the scale was good with alpha equal to .73 ($\alpha = .83$ in Hill et al. 2001, with employed participants).

Own Family and Work Orientations

Participants rated their family orientation on two items (items focusing on family in Meeussen et al. 2016): “I will make time to take care of all the needs of my children” and “I will not really concern myself with my children’s upbringing”

(reversed), which correlated significantly ($r = .51$, $p < .001$). Participants rated their work orientation on two items (Meeussen et al. 2016): “I will spend time on building a successful career” and “I will spend little time on my career” (reversed), which correlated significantly ($r = .48$, $p < .001$) similarly to Meeussen and colleagues (2016) measure ($r = .45$). Next, participants were asked to think about their ideal relationship and partner. They were told that even if they had a partner at the moment, their answers should not reflect the characteristics of this partner but rather more generally the way they wanted their future relationship and partner ideally to be.

Communion of Ideal Partner

Participants rated the importance of six communal characteristics as qualities of their ideal future partner: caring, friendly, understanding, helpful, warm, and empathic, rated from 1 (*Not at all important*) to 7 (*Very important*) (Coleman and Franiuk 2011; Cuddy et al. 2004; Fiske et al. 2002). Internal consistency was high ($\alpha = .89$) and similar to previous research ($\alpha s = .80$ –.84 in Coleman and Franiuk 2011; Cuddy et al. 2004; Fiske et al. 2002).

Agency of Ideal Partner

Similarly, participants rated the importance of six agentic characteristics as qualities of their ideal future partner: competent, confident, intelligent, efficient, enterprising, and capable, rated from 1 (*Not at all important*) to 7 (*Very important*) (Coleman and Franiuk 2011; Cuddy et al. 2004; Fiske et al. 2002). Internal consistency was good ($\alpha = .83$) and similar to previous research ($\alpha s = .75$ –.90 in Coleman and Franiuk 2011; Cuddy et al. 2004; Fiske et al. 2002).

Work and Family Orientation of Ideal Partner

Similarly, the items for own work orientation were adapted to measure work orientation of participants’ ideal partner: “My ideal partner will spend time on building a successful career” and “My ideal partner will spend little time on his career” (reversed), correlating significantly ($r = .45$, $p < .001$). The same items as for own family orientation were adapted to measure family orientation of participants’ ideal partner: “My ideal partner will make time to take care of all the needs of our children” and “My ideal partner will not really concern himself with his children’s upbringing” (reversed), correlating significantly ($r = .26$, $p < .001$).

Results

Means and standard deviations for all variables as well as their correlations can be found in Table 1b. On average, participants

were more family-oriented than work-oriented, $t(222) = 12.28, p < .001$. In an ideal male partner they sought more communion than agency, $t(222) = 12.16, p < .001$, as well as a higher family orientation than work orientation, $t(222) = 7.05, p < .001$. Moreover, both in their own future aspirations and in their expectations for an ideal male partner, work and family orientations had a small but significant positive relation, indicating that they wanted both aspects in their own and their partner's life rather than either one or the other.

As a stringent test of our predictions, we examined relations between women's own work orientation and an ideal partner's communion or family orientation while controlling for women's own family orientation and the extent to which they sought agentic, work-oriented qualities in an ideal partner. We tested the hypotheses using two structural equation models predicting either communion and agency of an ideal partner (Model 1)—or the family and work orientation of an ideal partner (Model 2)—from own family and work orientation, with expected work-family balance as a moderator. Table 2 presents all estimates of both models.

First, Model 1 examined what predicts the extent to which women seek a partner with communal or agentic characteristics. Results showed significant main effects of women's own work orientation and their expected work family balance, such that women sought more communal characteristics in an ideal partner the more they were work-oriented and the more they expected being able to balance work and family. As expected, these main effects were qualified by a significant interaction between own work-orientation and expected work-family balance on seeking communion in an ideal partner. Simple slopes analyses (Hayes 2009), as displayed in Fig. 1, showed that the relation between own work orientation and seeking communal characteristics in a future partner was significant for participants who expected low work-family balance ($B = .26, SE = .07, p < .001$) whereas participants who expected high work-family balance showed no relationship between their

own work orientation and communion in their ideal partner ($B = .05, SE = .08, p = .463$). Thus, as hypothesized, women valued communal characteristics in a future partner more as their own work orientation was higher, and this was especially the case for women who expected it to be hard to combine work and family roles.

In addition to this effect confirming our hypothesis, results showed similar relations for the reversed, more traditional complementarity role division path: Women valued agentic characteristics more in an ideal partner the more they themselves had a family orientation, and this significant main effect was also qualified by a significant interaction with expected work family balance. Simple slopes analyses, as displayed in Fig. 2, showed that the relation between own family orientation and seeking agentic characteristics in a future partner was significant for participants who expected low work-family balance ($B = .25, SE = .09, p = .004$) whereas participants who expected high work-family balance showed no relationship between their own family orientation and agency in their ideal partner ($B = -.06, SE = .10, p = .508$).

Second, Model 2 examined what predicts the extent to which women looked for a partner with family and work orientations (see Table 2). Replicating the previous model and consistent with our hypothesis, results showed that the more women were work-oriented, the more they wanted their ideal partner to be family-oriented. Contrary to Model 1, this was true regardless of women's expected work-family balance because the interaction between own work orientation and expected work-family balance did not reach significance ($B = -.64, p = .079$). Thus, these results show that women valued a family orientation in a future partner more as their own work orientation was higher independent of their expectations regarding work-family balance.

In addition to this effect again confirming our hypothesis and showing that women seek complementarity in a partner, further results of Model 2 indicate that in other ways women

Table 2 Structural equation model predicting ideal Partner's characteristics from own orientation and expected work-family balance, Study 2

Predictor	Model 1		Model 2	
	Communion of ideal partner	Agency of ideal partner	Family orientation of ideal partner	Work orientation of ideal partner
Own family orientation	.61 (.31)	.82* (.33)	.23 (.29)	-.05 (.31)
Own work orientation	.68** (.25)	-.09 (.27)	.54* (.23)	-.02 (.25)
Expected work-family balance	1.22* (.57)	1.21* (.61)	.14 (.53)	-.70 (.56)
Own family orientation x WF balance	-.53 (.62)	-1.48* (.66)	.56 (.57)	.26 (.61)
Own work orientation x WF balance	-.88* (.39)	.32 (.42)	-.64 (.36)	.80* (.38)
R^2	.23	.12	.35	.27

Entries are standardized coefficients (with standard errors in parentheses)

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

Fig. 1 Simple slopes analyses of the interaction between own work orientation and expected work-family balance on communion of an ideal partner (study 2, model 1). The relationship between own work orientation and preferring a communal partner is significant among women scoring lower in expected work-family balance, but not among women scoring higher in expected work-family balance

also seek similarity in a partner. More specifically, the extent to which women wanted a work-oriented partner was significantly predicted by an interaction between own work orientation and expected work-family balance, with simple slopes analyses (displayed in Fig. 3) indicating that for both women low ($B = .39$, $SE = .08$, $p < .001$) and high ($B = .58$, $SE = .08$, $p < .001$) in expected work-family balance, own work orientation predicted the work orientation of one's ideal partner, and this relation was stronger for women high in expected work-family balance. Thus, the more women were work-oriented, the more they wanted a work-oriented partner. Yet, they show less similarity-seeking when they believe combining work and family will be difficult, probably to enable their partner to take on tasks in the other life domain as well.

Discussion

In sum, Study 2 showed that young college women in Belgium may seek both complementarity and similarity

in terms of agency and communion as well as work and family orientations in an ideal partner. The more they expected work and family to be difficult to combine, the lower their similarity and the higher their complementarity seeking. In line with our findings in Study 1 and in contrast to traditional gender norms for men, our results showed that women did value communion and a family orientation in an ideal partner; especially when they themselves had a higher work orientation. This suggests that young women seek a partner who will take up a sufficient share of family tasks to enable their own work aspirations and potentially reduce conflict between work and family tasks once they start a family or career.

Of course, these data are correlational and hence we cannot be sure of the causal direction of these findings. Although it is likely that women's own goals affect the partner they seek in life, it could also be that women adapt their own goals to the qualities that they find attractive in a partner. Even then, the finding remains that communal and family-oriented men are

Fig. 2 Simple slopes analyses of the interaction between own family orientation and expected work-family balance on agency of an ideal partner (study 2, model 1). The relationship between own work orientation and preferring an agentic partner is significant among women scoring lower in expected work-family balance, but not among women scoring higher in expected work-family balance

Fig. 3 Simple slopes analyses of the interaction between own work orientation and expected work-family balance on work orientation of an ideal partner (study 2, model 2). Although the relationship between own work orientation and the work orientation wanted in an ideal partner was positive and significant among all women, this relationship was stronger among women reporting high work-family balance

perceived to be attractive by some women. Study 2 investigated these relations in young college women who do not yet have a career and family and hence they answered based on preference rather than their current work and family reality. Yet, a limitation of the present sample is that these young women may not be fully able to estimate what their life will be like when combining a family and career. Also, both Studies 1 and 2 focused on men's involvement in childcare as a measure of their family orientation, whereas being family-oriented can of course be more than that.

Study 3

Therefore, Study 3 tested these same processes in an older sample of working women in stable relationships: If the attractiveness of family-oriented men is indeed driven by women's search for a partner who decreases potential difficulties in combining work and family roles, are working women in a relationship with a family-oriented man then more satisfied and do they experience lower conflict between work and family tasks? This would indicate that women's attraction to family-oriented men is indeed functional for their well-being and their work-family balance. Such a prediction is in line with previous research showing that women are more satisfied with their relationship the more they experience the division of household tasks between themselves and their partner as fair (Frisco and Williams 2003; Wilkie et al. 1998). Additionally, Study 3 moves beyond childcare as a measure of family-orientations, broadening it to (a) men's orientation toward his close family (partner and children) and (b) men's orientation toward his broader family (siblings, parents, parents-in-law) to test whether only the focus on close family or also the focus on broader family is beneficial for women.

Method

Participants

The sample consisted of 198 Belgian heterosexual dual-earning couples where both partners participated ($n = 396$ participants). Fully 130 (65.7%) of the couples were married, 64 (32.3%) were co-habiting, and 4 (2%) lived apart together. Participants were 22 to 59 years-old ($M = 38.42$, $SD = 8.44$) and had zero to four children ($M = 1.49$; $SD = 1.07$). They worked in a very wide range of sectors (most represented were Chemistry, Electronics, Energy, Government, Education, and Finances) and worked 39.52 h per week on average ($SD = 8.73$, range = 8–65).

Procedure and Measures

Study 3 took the form of an online survey targeting heterosexual dual-earner couples. Through snowball sampling procedures, employees were contacted to participate and asked to send the survey to their partner and other potential participants. Both partners completed a (separate) questionnaire about their work and family life. As compensation for their participation, they could win cinema tickets in a prize lottery. Measures are described in the same order as they were presented in the questionnaire. Items were aggregated to a scale and all scales were averaged such that higher scores indicate more of the construct. The [online supplement](#) provides all items in Dutch (as presented to participants) along with their English translation.

Family and Work Orientation

Both women and men were asked to indicate the importance of family and work in their life using a relative family and work centrality measure (Snir and Harpaz 2005). Specifically,

they were asked to divide 100 points over five life-domains: their job and career, their close family (partner, children), their larger family (siblings, parents, parents-in-law), their hobbies, and their societal engagement. We made two measures of men's family orientation: (a) a close family orientation using the ratings of the importance of close family and (b) a broad family orientation using the sum of the ratings of the importance of close and larger family ($r = .77, p < .001$). The ratings of the importance of job and career served as a measure of men's work orientation.

Work-Family and Family-Work Conflict

Women rated the extent to which their work tasks conflicted with their family tasks (work-to-family conflict) and the extent to which their family tasks conflicted with their work tasks (family-to-work conflict), each with three items (time-based conflict; Carlson et al. 2000). An example item for work-family conflict is: "My work keeps me from activities in my private life more than I would like," and an example item for family-work conflict is: "The time I spend on my private life often interferes with my work responsibilities," rated from 1 (*Strongly disagree*) to 5 (*Strongly agree*). Internal consistency was high for both work-family conflict ($\alpha = .89$) and family-work conflict ($\alpha = .80$) as was the original scale by Carlson and colleagues (2000; $\alpha = .87$ and $\alpha = .79$, respectively).

Own Life Satisfaction

Women's life satisfaction was measured with the Satisfaction with Life Scale (Diener et al. 1985). Participants rated five items (e.g. "I am satisfied with my life") from 1 (*Strongly disagree*) to 5 (*Strongly agree*). As in the original scale (Diener et al. 1985; $\alpha = .87$), internal consistency was high ($\alpha = .88$).

Results

Means and standard deviations for all variables as well as their correlations can be found in Table 1c. Compared to their male partner, women were more family-oriented ($t(197) = 3.53, p = .001$ for close family and $t(197) = 5.22, p < .001$ for broad family) and less work-oriented ($t(197) = -2.54, p = .012$). Both partners rated their family as more important in their life than their work (female partner: $t(197) = 13.08, p < .001$ for close family and $t(197) = 22.21, p < .001$ for broad family; male partner: $t(197) = 9.43, p < .001$ for close family and $t(197) = 17.98, p < .001$). Male and female partner's family orientations were positively related, as were their work orientations, indicating that couples tended to be similar in what they found important in life.

Using six hierarchical regression analyses, we first predicted women's life satisfaction, experienced work-family

conflict, or experienced family-work conflict from women's own (close or broad) family and work orientation (Step 1), and then we added their partner's (close or broad) family and work orientation in the model (Step 2; see Table 3). First looking at close family orientations, our results show that women's life satisfaction was positively related to their partner's close family orientation but not their partner's work orientation (see Table 3a). Thus, women were more satisfied with their life the more their partner valued his close family (his partner and potential children) in his life. Women's experience of work-family conflict was also negatively related to their partner's family orientation but not their partner's work orientation (see Table 3b). Thus, the more their partner valued his close family in his life, the less women had the feeling that their own work tasks interfered with their family tasks. Conversely, women's experience of family-work conflict was not related to their partner's family orientation (see Table 3a).

Next, looking at broad family orientations, results show that there is no relation between the extent to which men report valuing their broad family (partner, potential children, siblings, parents, and parents in law) and their female partner's life satisfaction, work-family conflict, or family-work conflict (see Table 3). Across all three regression analyses predicting life satisfaction, work-family conflict, and family-work conflict, none of the participants' or partner's broad family or work orientations was significant.

Discussion

Our findings show that women's preference for family-oriented men indeed appears functional for their well-being because women with a partner who is oriented more toward his close family were more satisfied with their lives. Moreover, women with a partner oriented more toward his close family experienced less work-family conflict. This effect may seem odd at first sight: If women have a more family-oriented partner, wouldn't this reduce their family tasks and hence family-work conflict rather than work-family conflict? Yet, gender norms prescribe that women are highly family-oriented, put the needs of their family above all other needs, and prioritize family over work (Hays 1996; Prentice and Carranza 2002). Therefore, it is likely that women protect their family domain more strongly than their work domain. In that case, variables that put a strain on women's time will increase women's experience that their (prioritized) family tasks interfere with their work, whereas variables that allow women more time, such as a family-oriented partner, will decrease women's experience that work interferes with their (prioritized) family.

The benefits for women associated with having a family-oriented male partner only occurred to the extent that this male partner was oriented toward the close family (i.e., his partner

Table 3 Predicting life satisfaction, work-family conflict, and family-work conflict from Women's own and their Partner's close and broad family and work orientations, Study 3

Predictors	Close Family Orientations						Broad Family Orientations					
	Step 1			Step 2			Step 1			Step 2		
	β	b	t	β	b	t	β	b	t	β	b	t
(a) Life satisfaction												
Own family orientation	-.01	-.001	-.17	-.03	-.002	-.39	-.03	-.001	-.29	-.06	-.003	-.58
Own work orientation	-.04	-.002	-.48	-.02	-.001	-.23	-.05	-.003	-.52	-.06	-.003	-.57
Partner family orientation				.15	.01	2.04*				.13	.01	1.33
Partner work orientation				-.01	-.001	-.17				.02	.001	.20
R ²		.001			.03			.001			.01	
ΔR^2					.02						.01	
(b) Work-family conflict												
Own family orientation	.01	.001	.16	.03	.003	.38	.03	.003	.32	.05	.004	.52
Own work orientation	.11	.01	1.44	.10	.01	1.29	.13	.01	1.32	.14	.01	1.37
Partner family orientation				-.15	-.02	-1.98*				-.09	-.01	-.98
Partner work orientation				-.03	-.003	-.39				-.04	-.004	-.44
R ²		.01			.03			.01			.02	
ΔR^2					.02						.01	
(c) Family-work conflict												
Own family orientation	.003	.000	.04	.001	.000	.01	-.11	-.01	-1.14	-.10	-.01	-.94
Own work orientation	-.04	-.003	-.48	-.06	-.01	-.79	-.12	-.01	-1.19	-.13	-.01	-1.33
Partner family orientation				.01	.001	.18				-.04	-.003	-.44
Partner work orientation				.14	.01	1.84				.11	.01	1.15
R ²		.002			.02			.01			.03	
ΔR^2					.02						.02	

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

and potential children), but not to the extent that the partner was more broadly family-oriented toward his siblings, parents, and parents-in-law as well. This may be explained by the processes outlined in Study 2, showing that women may seek a family-oriented partner to be able to pursue their work ambitions. It is likely that a partner who is oriented toward the broader family (siblings, parents, parents-in-law) does not enable women's work goals or reduce conflict between work and family because such a broad family-orientation does not reduce women's family tasks at home.

A strength of the current study is that we related women's life satisfaction and experiences of conflict between work and family roles with the family orientation of their partner as reported by their partner rather than as perceived by the women themselves, avoiding common method bias. A limitation is that these data are correlational, thus we cannot draw causal conclusions from our results. It is very likely that men's family orientation is also dependent on their female partner and the situation at home. Yet, in that case, when their female partner is less satisfied and experiences more conflict between her work and family roles, it would be more—or at least as—

plausible that men would increase rather than decrease their family orientation in order to provide support. Future research can look further into causality as well as the mediators of these relations. For instance, what do men oriented to the close family do exactly that makes their partner more satisfied, and how does this differ from men with a broader family orientation?

General Discussion

Although gender norms prescribing men to be agentic and work-oriented rather than communal and family-oriented are well-documented and relatively stable over time (Diekmann and Eagly 2000; Haines et al. 2016; Prentice and Carranza 2002), our findings show they may be toppling in relationship contexts. We found that communal, family-oriented men are perceived to be attractive by women and that especially work-oriented women seek more communion and family orientation in a male partner. This communion-seeking was stronger for work-oriented college women who expected it would be

difficult to balance work and family. Once working and in a relationship, women's life satisfaction is indeed higher, and their experience of conflict between work and family lower, the more their partner is oriented toward his close (but not his broader) family.

These findings add a novel perspective to research on gender norms and social norms more generally by showing that norms are context-dependent and may be changing differently across contexts. Identifying contexts in which norms for a group are more or less strong can provide valuable insights into processes behind norm change. Social role theory research has argued that gender prescriptions stem from the repeated pairing of men with agentic roles and of women with communal roles (Eagly 1987). Consequently, prescriptions change when the social roles of a certain group change (Koenig and Eagly 2014). Norms for women have indeed changed as women in industrialized countries increasingly took up work roles in the last decades (Dickman and Eagly 2000; England 2010). Conversely, gender norms for men changed far less because men's participation in family roles has not increased equally (Croft et al. 2015; Haines et al. 2016).

Expanding on this work, our findings suggest that change in norms for men may not only come from change in men's roles, but also start from change in women's roles. Indeed, because men's and women's lives are closely linked in heterosexual relationships (Eagly et al. 2009; Elder 1998), men and women are also affected by norms and roles for the other gender (Meeussen et al. 2016) and the work-family experiences of one partner cross-over to affect the other (Bakker and Demerouti 2013; Schooreel and Verbruggen 2016). Through these processes, changes in women's roles and norms (toward work-oriented and agency) may lead to changes in men's roles and norms (toward family-oriented and communion) within relationship contexts.

This interchange is consistent with identity theory, which indicates that people's commitment to certain identities does depends not only on how salient or important this identity is to themselves, but also on the expectations that important others have of them in engaging in this identity (Stryker and Burke 2000). Applying this reasoning to fatherhood, Fox and Bruce (2001) showed that men's engagement in fathering tasks is predicted by the importance of this role in their life and also by expectations that significant others have of them as a father. The valuation of a communal man as an ideal partner and women's corresponding partner expectations and choices, as found in our studies, may thus reward and strengthen men's communion and family orientations—and change men's roles. This toppling of male norms within heterosexual relationship contexts could then over time also lead to a change in general norms for men.

For men, such a change toward less traditional male norms and roles has benefits because engaging in communal and

family tasks is related to higher well-being, health, and relationship satisfaction for men (Croft et al. 2015; Knoester et al. 2007; Zimmerman 2000). For women, such a change toward less traditional male norms and roles also has benefits because men's greater involvement in family tasks reduces women's second shift and conflict between work and family roles as well as allows them to pursue career ambitions more (Croft et al. 2015).

Limitations and Future Research Directions

In addition to the specific methodological limitations of our studies as addressed in the discussion section of each study, several potential boundary conditions of our findings, as well as open questions for future research, remain. Our studies focused only on women's perspectives. Although the toppling of male norms in relationship contexts has benefits for men (cf. *supra*), it may also entail costs for men as long as norms for men generally remain traditional. Future research could examine whether it is difficult for men to combine more communal expectations at home with potential social penalties of communal characteristics in other contexts (Vandello and Bosson 2013) because it may be distressing to conceal parts of their identity (Quinn and Earnshaw 2013). Moreover, future research could investigate to what extent increased prescriptions for men to be communal and family-oriented do or do not go along with more relaxed prescriptions for men to be agentic and work-oriented. As long as there are strong prescriptions for men to be work-oriented, expectations for men to also be family-oriented will be costly because men are likely to experience backlash for prioritizing family over work (Prentice and Carranza 2002) and they will experience increases in work-family conflict and total work load (Kitterød and Rønsen 2017).

Within the heterosexual relationship context, it could be that our findings of the attractiveness of communal, family-oriented men only hold to the extent that men also sufficiently fulfill expectations of being agentic and work-oriented. In our Studies 1 and 3, (described or actual) men combined work and family tasks, and in Study 2, agentic and work-orientations were also valued in ideal partners. Thus, it would be interesting for future research to examine whether communal, family-oriented men also need to have agentic, work-oriented qualities to be perceived as attractive; and if so, where the tipping point would be. To put it differently, are stay-at-home fathers perceived to be as attractive as family-oriented men that also have a part-time or full-time paid job?

Moreover, although we expect that changes in men's roles will occur because women prefer and benefit from communal and family-oriented men, it remains to be tested whether this indeed is the case. It could be that women with higher work orientations prefer a communal, family-oriented partner, but cannot find one. In that case, they could remain single,

postpone or reject parenthood, change their expectations for potential partners, or change their work aspirations. Future research could look into these alternative possibilities.

A number of studies already provide indirect evidence as to these options. First, a recent large-scale international study looking into the effects of the increasingly high education levels of women on relationship formation shows that highly educated women do not remain single more often (De Hauw et al. 2016). Although education level, as in this research by De Hauw and colleagues (2016) and work aspirations (as in the current research), are of course not the same, this suggests that it may not be the case that women with higher work orientations remain single more often. Second, research indeed shows that some women postpone or reject parenthood in order to build a successful career (Kemkes-Grottenthaler 2003; Mathews and Hamilton 2009). Of course, it would need to be tested whether such decisions depend on the communion and family orientation of these women's partner.

Third, research has shown that a majority of women perceived the distribution of household tasks with their partner as fair even though they performed about two-thirds of these tasks (Lennon and Rosenfield 1994; Nakamura and Akiyoshi 2015). These findings suggest that women may lower their expectations of the family orientation of a potential partner, though we do not know how these findings relate to women's work orientation. Fourth, in line with the idea that women may lower their work orientations, statistics show that mothers less often than fathers are employed full-time: In 2015, 56.2% of European mothers in a relationship worked fulltime as compared to 83.7% of European fathers in a relationship (European Institute for Gender Equality 2017). Yet, here too it would need to be tested whether this depends on the communion and family orientation of women's partners.

Thus, future research could investigate the extent to which the change of women's roles and norms fosters change in men's roles and norms as well as the factors that foster or hinder such processes of norm change for men. For instance, change in men's roles and norms driven by women's partner preferences may come about faster in social contexts in which it is more difficult for men than for women to find a partner, such that men have to adapt more to find a partner -and slower in social contexts in which it is more difficult for women to find a partner, such that women have to adapt more (as we noted previously).

More broadly, the contextualized nature of social norms can inform further research on other social groups, such as groups based on culture, sexuality, or age. Investigating whether general norms for these groups differ across contexts adds to knowledge of norms and norm change, and it can inform where change is happening and what the effects of such changes are. Also, the intersection between gender and other identities may be interesting to explore, since

historical and socio-cultural differences may affect norms for men as well as women's preferences for male partners differently for different social groups (see for instance Abrams et al. 2017, on U.S. Black women's perceptions of Black men).

Practice Implications

Our findings also have implications for both counselors and policymakers. Our results show that men's orientation toward their close family is related to higher life satisfaction and lower work-family conflict for their female partners. Couples therapy could build on this finding by enabling men and women to communicate and negotiate expectations of each other in terms of communion and agency as well as family and work orientations. Counselors may also need to guide men in the process of norm change toward increased expectations to be communal and family-oriented because changes in expectations come with uncertainty (Ridgeway 2011). Also, as we discussed, increased expectations may entail risks for men if they still experience backlash for being communal and family-oriented in other social contexts (Rudman and Mescher 2013; Vandello and Bosson 2013).

Similarly, increased expectations for men in the family domain will increase men's total workload (Kitterød and Rønsen 2017) and put men at risk of job burnout (Maslach et al. 2001) or parental burnout (Roskam et al. 2017) when expectations for men in the work domain remain unchanged. Thus, policymakers and Human Resource practitioners should enable men to be more family-oriented, for instance by increasing paternal leave and by offering family-friendly work policies. As outlined by Croft and colleagues (2015), enabling men to be more communal and family-oriented would not only provide benefits for men, women, and their children in terms of well-being, but it could also increase men's interest in communal professions that currently face labor shortages (e.g., nursing; Goodin 2003) and foster gender equality in work and family domains more generally.

Conclusion

In the present paper we showed that traditional norms for men may be toppling in heterosexual relationship contexts where women prefer and benefit from communal, family-oriented partners. Thus, increased gender equality in work and family domains may be fed through romantic relationships. Moreover, our findings indicate that norms are context-dependent, and this understanding expands knowledge on norm change by outlining how change in norms for men may be instigated from changes in women's roles and norms through partner preferences.

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Compliance with Ethical Standards

The protocols in Studies 1 and 2 were approved by the University of Leuven Social and Societal Ethics Committee. Study 3 (2013–2014) was carried out before this committee was founded (April 2014) but complies with the guidelines of this later committee, with the 1964 Helsinki declaration and its later amendments or comparable ethical standards, and with the privacy laws.

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