

# Singles by choice differ from singles by circumstance in their perceptions of the costs and benefits of romantic relationships

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## Introduction

Past research has found that the well-being of singles who desire a romantic relationship (“singles by circumstance”) is poorer than that of singles who choose to remain single, in terms of loneliness, depression and self-esteem (Slonim & Schütz, 2015). Therefore, it is important to understand why some singles are satisfied with their relationship status while others are highly motivated to change it. Could it be that the two groups of singles differ regarding their expectations from romantic relationships?

## Hypothesis

We hypothesized that singles by circumstance and coupled individuals hold more positive views of romantic relationships, while singles by choice perceive romantic relationships as more costly and less beneficial.

## Method

We analyzed data from the 5<sup>th</sup> wave of the national German panel survey, Pairfam (Huinink et al., 2011). The distinction between the two groups of singles was based on the 5-point-scale item, “I would like to have a partner”. 550 men and 352 women were classified as singles by circumstance. 230 men and 238 women were classified as singles by choice.

Figure 1: Perceived benefits of romantic partnerships, by relationship status

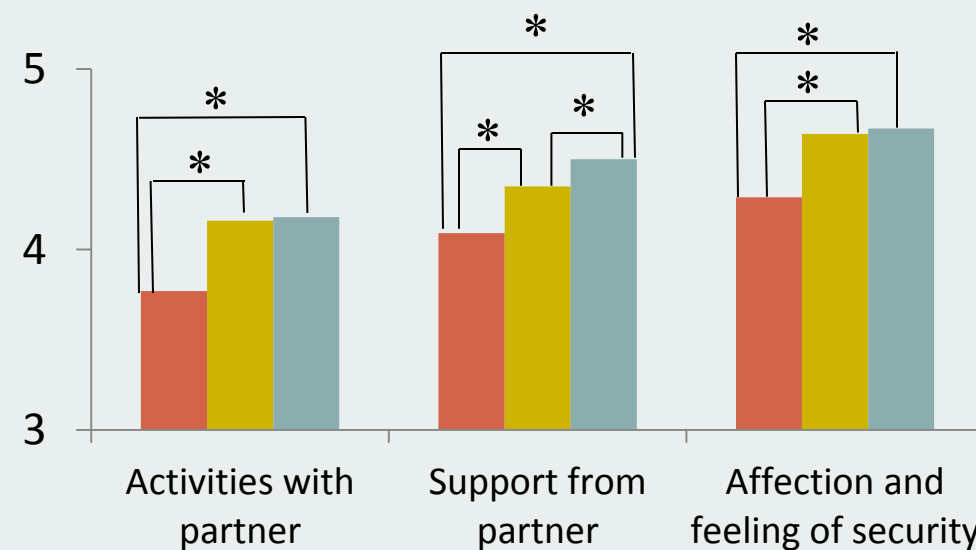
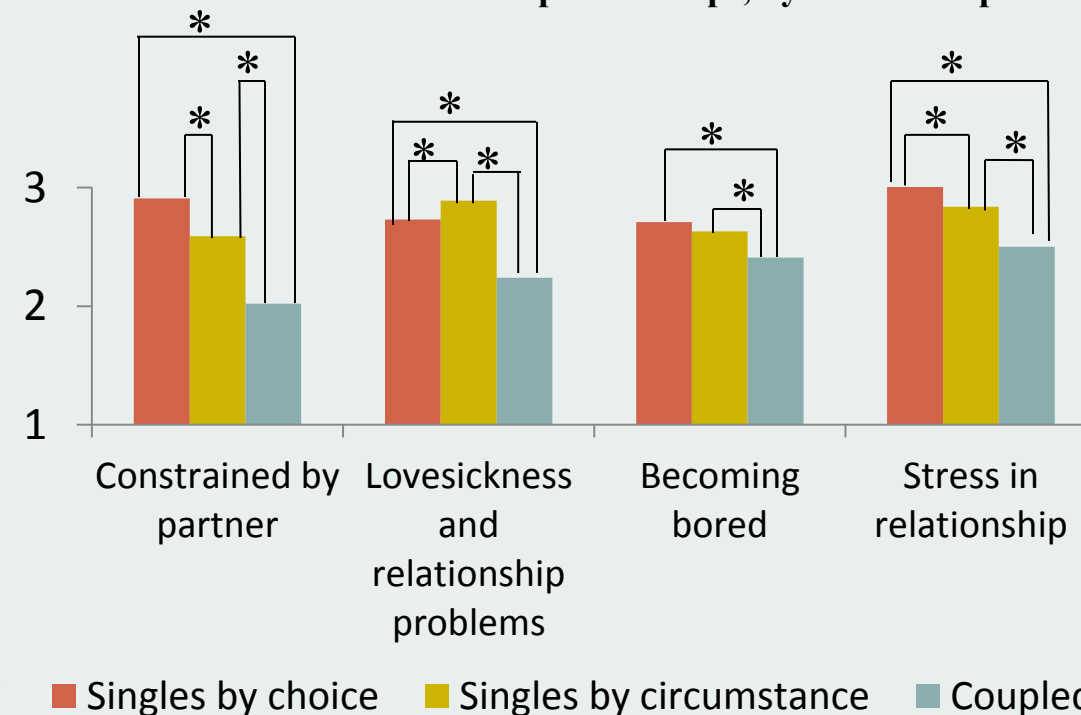


Figure 2: Perceived costs of romantic partnerships, by relationship status



■ Singles by choice ■ Singles by circumstance ■ Coupled

## References

- Huinink, J., Brüderl, J., Nauck, B., Walper, S., Castiglioni, L., & Feldhaus, M. (2011). Panel analysis of intimate relationships and family dynamics (pairfam): Conceptual framework and design. *Zeitschrift für Familienforschung-Journal of Family Research*, 23(1).
- Slonim, G. & Schütz, A. (2015). Are perceived differences between singles by choice and singles by circumstance accurate? Paper presented at the 4th international user conference of the German family panel Pairfam, Jena, Germany.

## Results

Singles by choice expect less benefits from romantic relationships than singles by circumstance and coupled individuals. Singles by circumstance and coupled individuals are closer to each other in expectations. The pattern emerges especially for activities together and emotional expression. See Figure 1.

Coupled people expect less costs from romantic relationships than singles. Singles by choice are especially worried about being constrained by a partner and experiencing boredom or stress in a relationship, while singles by circumstance are especially afraid to get lovesick. See Figure 2.

The patterns are consistent across genders and age cohorts.

## Discussion

Of the three groups, coupled people consistently report perceiving romantic relationships as the least costly and most beneficial. This could be the result of solving a cognitive dissonance.

Examining the perceived costs, it seems that singles by choice put more importance on being independent while singles by circumstance fear they may love a partner too much. Future research may investigate potential differences in attachment styles between the groups.