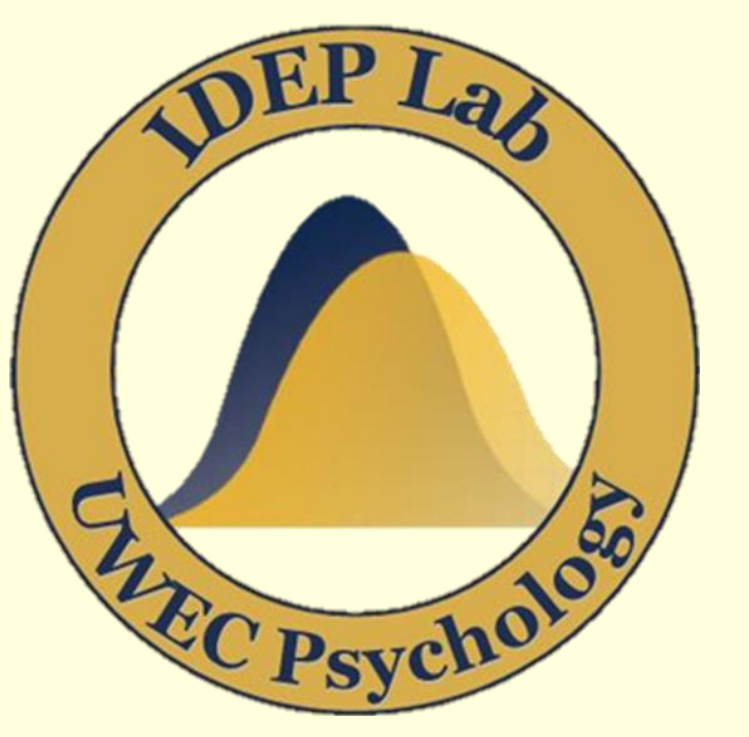# What's Worse: Lazy but Smart, or Stupid but Hardworking?
Gender Differences in Mate Preferences and Aversions

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General Background

- Around the world, men and women are similar in some of the characteristics they prefer in a long-term romantic partner (e.g., affection, honesty, and kindness) and different in others (e.g., men more than women prioritize physical attractiveness in their partners, and women more than men prioritize dominance and status).[1, 2, 3]
- Discussions of mate preferences often focus on the characteristics men and women seek in a partner; however, the characteristics most avoided may be even more important. Negative characteristics can have strong harmful effects on fitness; hence, men and women should psychological adaptations that guide them to avoid fitness-compromising characteristics in a partner even more strongly than they pursue fitness-enhancing characteristics.[4]
- In fact, gender-differentiated priorities manifest in characteristics individuals most avoid in a long-term romantic partner; for example, men trade off status and resources in a partner more often than women do in order to have a physically attractive mate.[5] Men more than women also respond more critically to information about a potential mate's physical attractiveness when framed negatively rather than positively, and women more than men respond more critically to information about a potential mate's earning potential and ambition when framed negatively rather than positively.[4]
- The current studies are designed to build on previous research. In Study 1, we compare the strength with which young adults pursue *positive* mate characteristics to the strength with which they avoid *negative* mate characteristics. We also compare gender differences in the *pursuit* of *positive* mate characteristics with gender differences in the *avoidance* of *negative* mate characteristics. In Study 2, through forced choice options, we systematically document the positive traits the sexes most prioritize and the negative traits they most avoid.
- Our guiding hypothesis was that, given the fitness costs of poor mating decisions, gender differences in the avoidance of negative attributes (such as "unattractive" and "lazy") would be even more robust than previously documented gender differences in the pursuit of positive attributes (such as "attractive" and "hard-working").

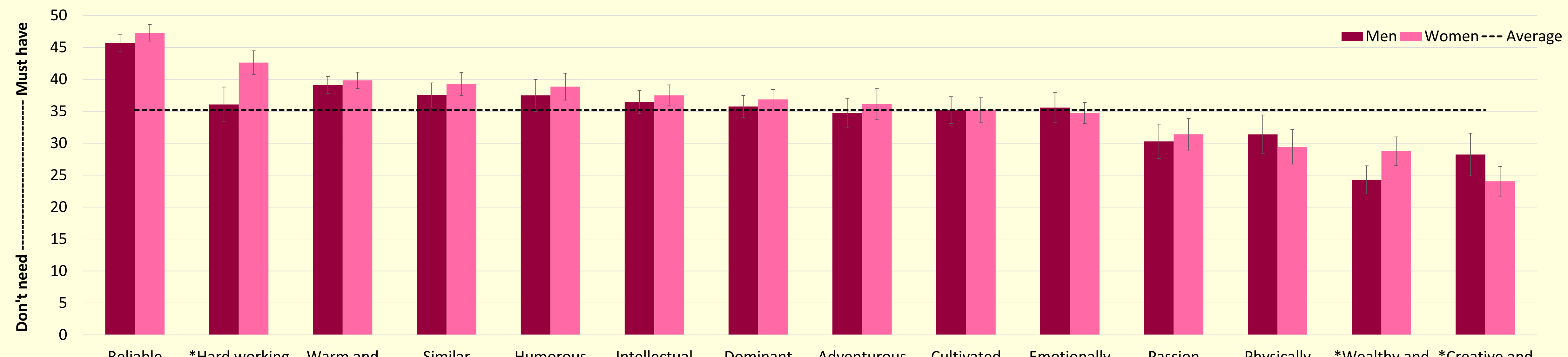## Study 1: Continuous Ratings of Positive and Negative Characteristics

Figure 1: Men's and women's mean preference rating for each category of positive mate characteristics. Error bars represent ± 2 SEM. Asterisks denote statistically reliable sex differences.

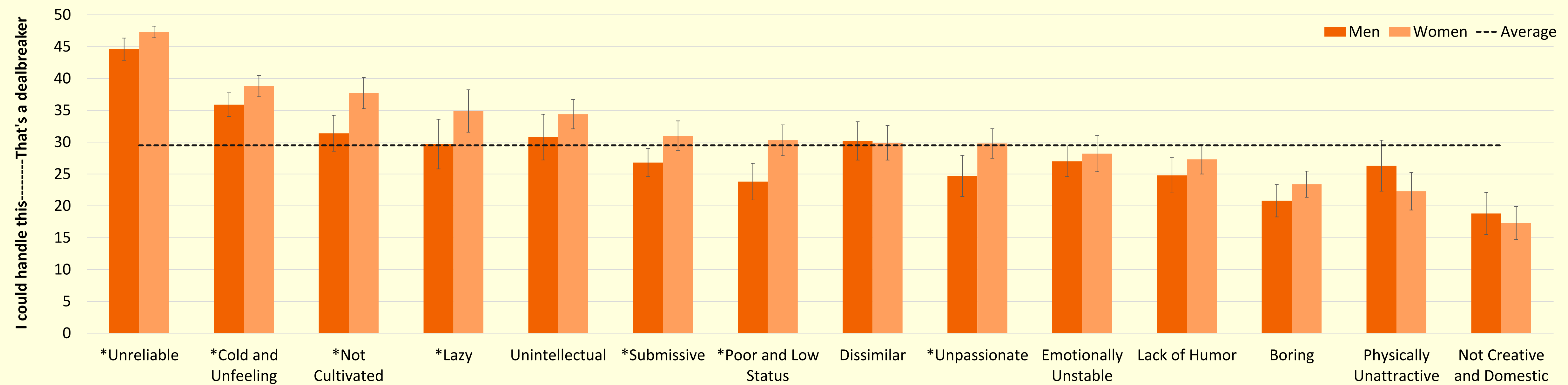Figure 2: Men's and women's mean avoidance of each category of aversive mate characteristics. Error bars represent ± 2 SEM. Asterisks denote statistically reliable sex differences.

- In study 1, we utilized previous literature[1, 2] and an act nomination procedure to generate a comprehensive list of 76 *positive* attributes and their parallel *negative* counterparts.
- The positively framed mate *preferences* questionnaire asked participants (N=109) to consider a potential long-term mate, and, recognizing that no one can "have it all," rate each of the 76 positive attributes on a scale of "I don't need this in a partner" (0) to "I absolutely must have this in a partner" (50).
- The negatively framed mate *aversions* questionnaire asked participants (N=106) to consider a potential long-term mate and, recognizing that every individual comes with drawbacks, rate each of the 76 negative attributes on a scale of "I could deal with this" (0) to "No way; this is an absolute deal-breaker" (50).
- The 76 attributes were categorized into 14 major themes, as seen in the graphs on the left. As revealed by a comparison of the dashed lines, and contrary to our expectations, participants tended to more strongly prefer the positive attributes (M=35) than avoid the negative attributes (M=30).
- As predicted, gender differences in avoidance of negative traits were far more pronounced than gender differences in preference for positive traits. That is:
- As shown in Figure 1, women more than men preferred a *hardworking* and *wealthy/high status* partner; men more than women preferred a *creative and domestic* partner.
- As shown in Figure 2, women more than men avoided an *unreliable, cold/unfeeling, uncultivated, lazy, unintellectual, submissive, poor/low status,* and *unpassionate* partner. There were no items in this portion of our study that men avoided significantly more than women.

Study 2: Forced Tradeoffs of Positive and Negative Characteristics

- In study 2, we began with 11 core traits and their negative counterparts (e.g., smart/stupid, good-looking/ugly). In a series of 55 trade-off questions, we pitted each trait against each one of the other traits.
- In the positive framing of these questions, participants (N=211) were asked which was *better* as a long-term mate, someone who was "X" (positive trait) but "Y" (negative trait), or "Y" (positive trait) but "X" (negative trait). An example is shown below.

What type of person is BETTER as a long-term romantic partner?

Smart BUT Ugly   Good Looking BUT Stupid
        ○   ○

- In the negative framing of the questions, participants (N=189) were asked which was *worse* as a long-term mate, someone who was "X" (negative trait) but "Y" (positive trait), or "Y" (negative trait) but "X" (positive trait). An example is shown below.

What type of person is WORSE as a long-term romantic partner?

Ugly BUT Smart   Stupid BUT Good Looking
        ○   ○

- As shown in Figure 3, in the positive frame, women more often than men traded off other positive traits to obtain a mate who was *thoughtful, polite,* and *family-oriented*; men more often than women traded off other positive traits to obtain a mate who was *good-looking* and *smart*.
- As shown in Figure 4, In the negative frame, women more often than men settled for other negative traits to avoid a partner who was *disloyal*; men more often than women settled for other negative traits to avoid a partner who was *ugly* or *stupid*.
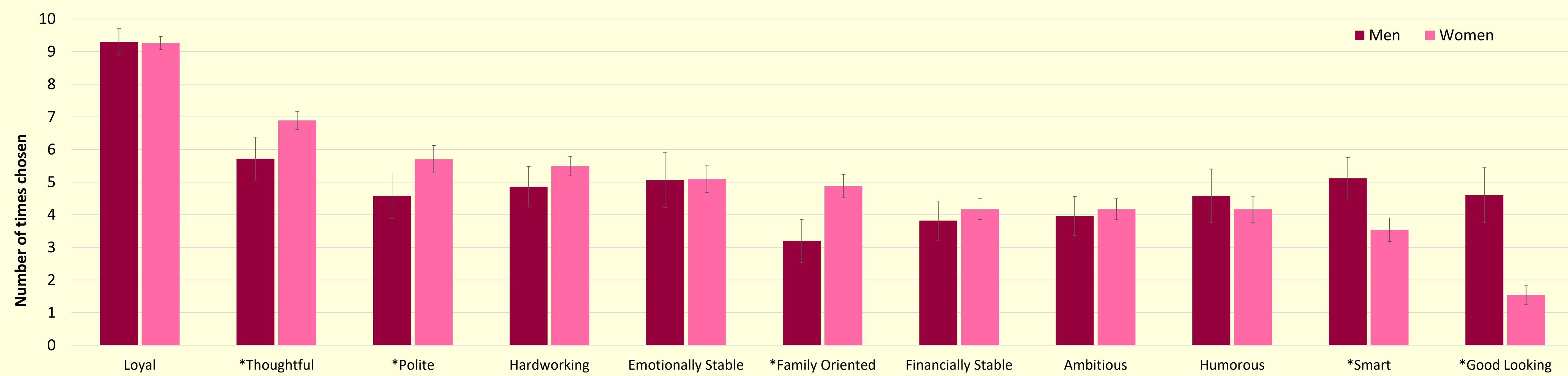

Figure 3: The number of times that participants chose each trait as more important in a mate, when pitted against each of the other traits. Error bars represent ± 2 SEM. Asterisks denote statistically reliable sex differences.
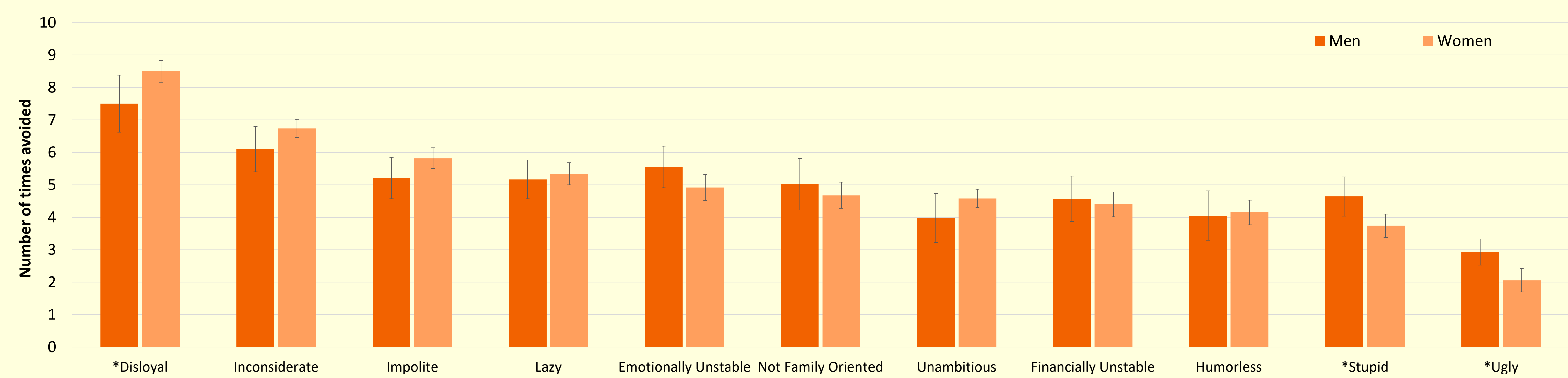

Figure 4: The number of times that participants actively avoided each trait in a mate by opting for a different negative trait it was pitted against. Error bars represent ± 2 SEM. Asterisks denote statistically reliable sex differences.

General Discussion

- In two studies, we investigated men's and women's self-reported pursuit of positive traits, relative to their avoidance of the negative counterparts of those traits, in a potential long-term partner.
- Across the studies, both sexes showed strong preferences for reliability (loyalty), warmth, and thoughtfulness in a partner, relative to other traits; and both sexes avoided the negative counterparts of those traits.
- Contrary to expectation, Study 1 participants did not avoid negative traits more strongly than they pursued the positive. We believe there may be many factors at play in explaining participants' relative lack of concern about negative characteristics, such as inflated optimism among young adults about their likelihood of finding, attracting, and keeping a long-term partner who has few, if any, character flaws.
- The sexes differed predictably. Women in Study 1 preferred a mate who was hard-working and of high status more than men did. Women also avoided many negative attributes more strongly than men did, including a partner who is lazy, submissive, of low status, and uncultivated.
- Contrary to effects documented in past studies, men in Study 1 did not report a stronger preference than women for a physically attractive partner, nor did men rate unattractiveness as any more of a deal-breaker than women did. However, in Study 2, when participants were forced to choose between traits, men more often than women traded off other positive traits to obtain a mate who was *good-looking*, and men more often than women settled for other negative traits in order to avoid a partner who was *ugly*; these effects were the largest we observed across the two studies, and they demonstrate that for men more than for women, attractiveness is a necessity more than a luxury.

References

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