

Men, women evaluate losses differently in mating contexts, researcher says

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(Medical Xpress)—Much research in psychology and economics has shown that people are "loss averse," meaning they tend to weigh losses more strongly than equivalent gains. For example, people are more motivated by a loss of \$100 than a gain of the same amount.

But a University of Kansas [researcher](#) says the [phenomenon](#) of loss aversion isn't necessarily universal across all situations – and it can vary significantly among [men and women](#), particularly when it comes to mating.

In a series of experiments, KU assistant business professor Jessica Li and her colleagues – Douglas Kenrick and Steven Neuberg from Arizona State University, and Vladas Griskevicius from the University of Minnesota – demonstrated a significant difference in loss aversion between [men](#) and women in a mating-[motivation](#) condition as compared to a control condition. In particular, while women's loss aversion remained unchanged in the mating context, men's loss aversion was erased altogether.

"We found that activating a mating motivation had no impact on how women weighed potential losses and gains, but it basically erased, and sometimes even reversed, loss aversion for men," said Li. "That is, in a mating scenario, men are less concerned about potential losses and more concerned with potential gains."

In addition, Li and her colleagues conducted experiments using a self-protection condition and found that loss aversion increased for both men and women. In other words, being fearful or concerned for their safety caused men and women alike to want to protect against potential losses.

Taken together, Li's research suggests that the phenomenon of loss aversion isn't as universal or domain-general as some researchers have thought it to be. And more broadly, Li said, it suggests that

researchers should consider an evolutionary perspective in explaining loss aversion.

"Our research is different in that it proposes an evolutionary perspective to the idea of loss aversion," said Li. "While much past research has considered loss aversion to be a fairly universal human bias, an evolutionary perspective suggests that loss aversion might be an adaptive bias in some life domains – like self-protection – but not in others."

An immense amount of research in economics and decision-making has been devoted to documenting the many "errors" and "irrational" biases – like loss aversion – that appear to riddle the human brain. But according to Li, an evolutionary perspective suggests that this approach can be misleading.

"Rather than being riddled with errors, the human mind is optimized to solve recurring problems in the ancestral environment," Li said. "Not only are humans excellent intuitive thinkers when information is presented in an ecologically relevant way, but the biases themselves represent neither errors nor irrationalities in the evolutionary sense. Instead, human biases would be expected to vary across different evolutionary situations because such domains present different costs and opportunities. Consistent with this logic, we find that loss aversion can be exacerbated, erased and even reversed when the context is the evolutionarily crucial domain of mate-seeking."

So does this mean that men are fearless when it comes to mating?

"Well, not exactly," Li said. "But they certainly think differently in a mate-seeking context. And from an [evolutionary perspective](#), that appears to be beneficial."

Provided by University of Kansas

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