



# Only Death Will Separate Us: The Role of Extramarital Partnerships among Himba Pastoralists

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## Abstract

Extramarital partnerships are highly stigmatized in many societies and are typically excluded from studies of family dynamics and social support. Nevertheless, in many societies such relationships are common and can have important impacts on resource security and health outcomes. However, current studies of these relationships come mainly from ethnographic studies, with quantitative data extremely rare. Here we present data from a 10-year study of romantic partnerships among a community of Himba pastoralists in Namibia, where concurrency is common. The majority of married men (97%) and women (78%) currently reported having more than one partner ( $n = 122$ ). Using multilevel models comparing marital and nonmarital relationships, we found that, contrary to conventional wisdom surrounding concurrency, Himba form enduring bonds with extramarital partners that often last decades and are very similar to marital ones in terms of length, emotional affect, reliability, and future prospects. Qualitative interview data showed that extramarital relationships were imbued with a set of rights and obligations that, while distinct from those of spouses, provide an important source of support. Greater inclusion of these relationships in studies of marriage and family would provide a clearer picture of social support and resource transfers in these communities and help to explain variation in the practice and acceptance of concurrency around the world.

**Keywords** Concurrency · Reproductive decision-making · Extramarital sex · Himba pastoralists

## Introduction

Marital partnerships are often valorized as the ideal type of union, to which others are compared (e.g., *pre-marital*, *extra-marital*), and their role as the core of the nuclear family has been similarly valued (Ganong et al., 1990; Scanzoni, 2001; Uzoka, 1979). However, social scientists have increasingly highlighted the plurality of family types that exist both in the west, and around the world, including those with single parents, blended families, same sex parents and intergenerational households (Parke, 2017; Sagers & Sims, 2005). One significant contribution of this work has been attention to adults aside from (biological) parents who have important supportive roles in the family (Emmott et al., 2021). For

example, grandmothers often provide emotional, instrumental and informational support that can have critical impacts on the health and well-being of women and their children (Nitz et al., 1995; Oberlander et al., 2007; Scelza, 2011c). A large body of work also exists on the role and effect of step-parents (Cartwright et al., 2009; Hofferth & Anderson, 2003), elder siblings and other children (Kramer, 2005; Page et al., 2021), and other kin (Ivey, 2000; Kramer, 2010; Starkweather & Keith, 2019).

Despite the overall attention paid to the roles of extra-parental figures, other types of relationships have remained in the shadows, none more than women's extramarital partners. Overwhelmingly, research on extra-marital partnerships focuses on their negative impact on family structure and function (Fincham & May, 2017; Negash & Morgan, 2016; Sori, 2007). These findings have likely played a significant role in precluding studies of the dynamics of extra-marital partnerships. One exception is the body of work on consensual non-monogamy, or polyamory, which has highlighted the potentially beneficial role of having multiple partners to share in the instrumental and emotional aspects of child rearing (Goldfeder & Sheff, 2013; Sheff, 2013).

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The lack of attention paid to support from extra-marital partners is particularly notable given the frequency and acceptance of extra-marital partnerships around the world. One cross-cultural study reported 39% of societies ( $N=185$ ) were accepting of some form of female extramarital sex (Broude & Greene, 1976). Restrictions against extra-marital sex are often more rigid for women than for men (Broude, 1980); nevertheless more than half (57%) of societies in the Standard Cross-Cultural Sample report extramarital sex occurring for women at either universal or moderate rates (Broude & Greene, 1976; Scelza, 2013, 2014). Given their prevalence, it is important to understand the role that these partners play, and whether in some cases they might be important sources of support.

There are few ethnographic studies that describe women's extramarital partnerships in detail, but those that do often mention benefits to women, their children, and, in some cases, even their husbands. In South American cultures that practice "partible paternity," where multiple men are believed to share paternity of a given child, women have a primary (marital) partner and one or more secondary fathers for each child. These secondary fathers are expected to provide resources to women during their pregnancy, to support the child, or to take on a primary role if the woman's husband dies (Beckerman et al., 1998; Starkweather & Hames, 2012; Walker et al., 2010). Other writings about female concurrency also report that women rely on their lovers for food and other resources (Knowles, 1993; Mah & Maughan-Brown, 2013). In some cases, extramarital partnerships involve both spouses, in a form of marital exchange. The !Gui of the Kalahari practice *zaa-ku*, an institution where couples form a sexual and economic partnership, based on the sharing of both food and sex (Imamura, 2001, 2015). Similar partnerships historically existed among Inuit, where couples formed reciprocal partnerships that were important for social and economic support, as well as help during crises (Guemple, 1986).

These cases highlight the need to know more about the potential role of extramarital partners in women's lives, including how these relationships form and function and what their place is within the larger contexts of marriage, family and social support. However, extramarital partner dynamics are notoriously difficult to study. While they are generally acknowledged to exist, and while people may discuss them in intimate circles, part of their very nature is that they operate outside of, or tangential to, formal kinship and social structures. This explains why the knowledge we do have tends to come from rich ethnographic work, typically garnered from interviews with a few individuals. Quantitative data on the details of these relationships are extremely rare. Large social surveys tend to report only rates, and even these have been critiqued for underreporting nonmarital (particularly female) sexual behavior (Curtis & Sutherland, 2004; Dare & Cleland, 1994; Helleringer et al., 2011).

In this brief report, we present data from a 10-year study of marital and nonmarital relationships among a population of Himba pastoralists, living in the Kunene region of Namibia. Using a mix of interview and survey data with 122 men and women, we aim to present a picture of what extramarital relationships among Himba look like and how they fit within larger social structures in this community. Both the frequency and the acceptance of concurrent marital and nonmarital relationships among Himba make this an ideal case to study the potential role of extramarital partnerships within larger support networks. Specifically, in this report we aim to compare marital and extramarital relationships in terms of their duration, emotional tenor and the quantity and quality of support they provide. We then contextualize our results within the broader literature in evolutionary theory to understand why concurrency may be normatively sanctioned and practiced among Himba, and how it may be adaptive for both men and women.

## Method

### Study Population

The Himba are a group of semi-nomadic pastoralists living in northwestern Namibia. Most continue to live in rural areas and rely largely on their cattle and small gardens for subsistence (Bollig, 2006). Integration with the cash economy is limited, but education, health services and access to cash have all increased markedly over the last decade. Himba practice double descent, retaining close and important connections with both matrilineal and patrilineal kin (Gibson, 1956; Scelza et al., 2019, 2020). Marriage is arranged through kin, though love matches are common, particularly for second marriages (Scelza, 2011a). Divorce is easily obtained, and women have a relatively high degree of sexual freedom, with both premarital and extramarital sex common and largely unstigmatized (Scelza et al., 2020; Scelza, 2011a, 2014). Wealth is passed between male maternal relatives (e.g., uncle to nephew), a pattern that is often linked with high degrees of female autonomy (Bollig, 2005).

Previous research has shown that Himba women have distinct perceptions of marital and extramarital partners. For example, in a study looking at partner preferences, we showed that women preferred husbands who were wealthy and hard-working, while they wanted their boyfriends to be generous and attractive (Scelza & Prall, 2018). The distinction between wealth and generosity highlighted an important distinction in the roles of formal and informal partners. Husbands are obligated to share household resources with their wives, resulting in wealth being listed as a critical trait. But among informal partners, giving is less obligatory, causing generosity to rise above wealth in the list of preferred traits

for a boyfriend. A follow-up study with Himba men showed similar results: In an experimental resource allocation task, men balanced the needs of both formal and informal partners, indicating a multi-tiered strategy of support for romantic partners (Scelza et al., 2019, 2020). Women have also been shown to alter their preferences based on their economic position. Those who are more resource-stressed, and who have more dependents, are open to a wider variety of partner (Prall & Scelza, 2020a), and having multiple partners has positive impacts on women's food security (Scelza et al., 2021).

## Participants and Procedure

Detailed demographic data, unstructured interviews, and participant observation have been collected in the community since 2010 and provide the basis for this study. Because the questions asked in this study are sensitive in nature, getting accurate counts of nonmarital relationships is challenging. To attenuate this, the researchers have developed long-term relationships with the families in the study area, with an emphasis on community-engaged research, helping to ensure reliability of responses (Broesch et al., 2020). We have also been able to re-check and update demographic data on multiple return visits. We also note that Himba speak freely about concurrency as a normative practice, with similar results reported by other researchers (Hazel, 2012; Van Wolputte, 2016).

Relationship history interviews were conducted in 2018 and 2019 from participants recruited from the study area ( $n = 122$ ). These interviews were collected opportunistically as we visited compounds or communal sites like water collection points. All adults living in Omuhonga and at least 15 years of age who had at least one current significant relationship partner were eligible to be interviewed. More women than men participated in the interviews, which was a result of a female-biased sex ratio (Scelza et al., 2021), women being more available during the day when men were out herding, and women's earlier age at marriage. All interviews were conducted with Scelza or Prall, along with a Namibian field assistant who provided simultaneous translation so that follow-up questions and clarifications could be addressed immediately. Participants received a small gift (e.g., maize, sugar or washing powder) in compensation for their time.

Participants were asked to answer a standard set of questions for each marital and non-marital partner. These questions included: information on length of relationship, information on the partner including marital status and number of children resulting from the relationship, and information on the partnership, including the time of last sexual encounter (for full details of survey see Supplemental Information). Additionally participants answered a set of binary questions on the perceived emotional affect of the relationship. Participants also provided information on how frequently they

saw the partner in person, and how frequently they talked on the phone, using three-item Likert scales: 1 (*rarely/never*), 2 (*sometimes*), 3 (*often*). Opportunistic ethnographic information and descriptions were also collected as part of these interviews to contextualize and provide "checks" on quantitative results (Broesch et al., 2020). Additional ethnographic information about this population has been previously published by our group and others (Bollig, 2006; Malan, 1995; Scelza, 2011b).

## Analytic Approach

Models predicting relationship variables with a binary outcome (emotional affect questions, marital status, etc.) were analyzed using multilevel Bernoulli models, with predictors including age of respondent, type of relationship, an age by relationship type interaction, sex of respondent and age by sex interactions. To predict relationship length, a Gaussian multilevel model was used, with predictors including relationship type and a fitted spline for age. For all models, varying intercepts by respondent were included, since most respondents had more than one partner. Models were fit to RStan using the *brms()* package with weakly regularized priors. Additional model details and results are described in the supplementary materials.

## Results

Interviews with women about their romantic relationships showed that a large majority of women practice concurrency (Table 1). Overall, 61% of women and 93% of men reported currently having more than one partner. This remains the case when the sample was limited to married individuals, with

**Table 1** Sample demographics from relationship history surveys ( $n = 122$ )

	Women ( $n = 80$ )	Men ( $n = 42$ )
Mean age (range)	32.6 (15–65)	38.9 (19–79)
Percent ever married	80	81
Current marital status		
Married	46 (58%)	33 (79%)
Divorced	13 (16%)	0
Widowed	4 (5%)	0
Never married	17 (21%)	9 (21%)
Number of current partners		
0	0	0
1	31 (39%)	3 (7%)
2	26 (32%)	14 (33%)
3	12 (15%)	9 (21%)
4 +	11 (14%)	16 (38%)

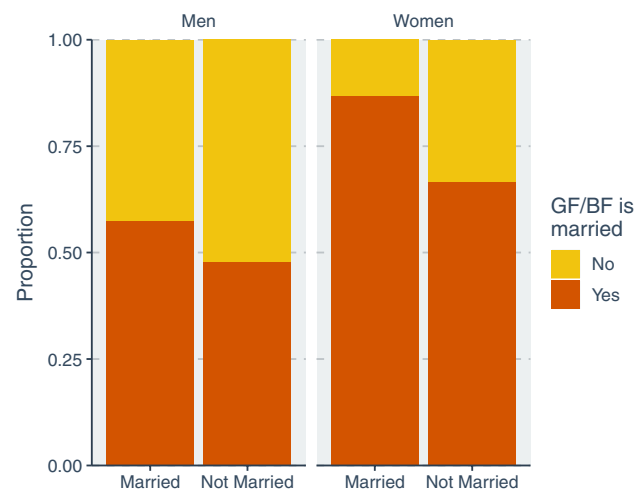
78% of women and 97% of men having at least one extramarital partner. The average number of partners in this sample was 2.1 (SD = 1.26), with 6 being the maximum reported number of partners.

Nonmarital relationships are long-lasting, differing little in length from marital relationships (Fig. 1). For individuals over 50, the average marital relationship has lasted 29.2 years, while for nonmarital relationships, the average is 27.9 years. Models predicting relationship length from age and type found that nonmarital relationships tend to be longer, but the effect overlaps zero ( $\beta = 0.17$ , 95% CI =  $-0.06$  to  $0.40$ , Figs. S1–S2).

When our sample of relationship histories was limited to those with at least one partner who is married, patterns of concurrency by gender can be seen (Fig. 2). The majority of both men's and women's nonmarital partners were themselves married, though this is more common for women (79% of boyfriends married) than men (55% of girlfriends married). Matching the marital status of each partner shows that in 49% of relationships both partners were practicing concurrency. Modeling indicates that older individuals were more likely to report that their informal partners were married ( $\beta_{\text{age}} = 0.18$ , 95% CI =  $0.11$ – $0.26$ ), particularly when the informal partners are men ( $\beta_{\text{age} \times \text{sex}} = -0.14$ , 95% CI =  $-0.21$  to  $-0.07$ , Fig. S3).

Women reported frequent contact with both their marital and nonmarital partners, with “often” being the modal response for both in-person and phone contact for both partner types (Fig. 3). In-person contact was more frequent between marital partners, while phone contact between the two partner types was very similar.

Respondent reports about qualitative aspects of their relationships indicated that romantic love is a feature of both marital and non-marital relationships (Fig. 4). Modeling results showed that men were more likely to report strong emotional affect (“I love him/her very much”) in their partnerships, as were individuals reporting on marital relationships. Other aspects of relationship quality like partner



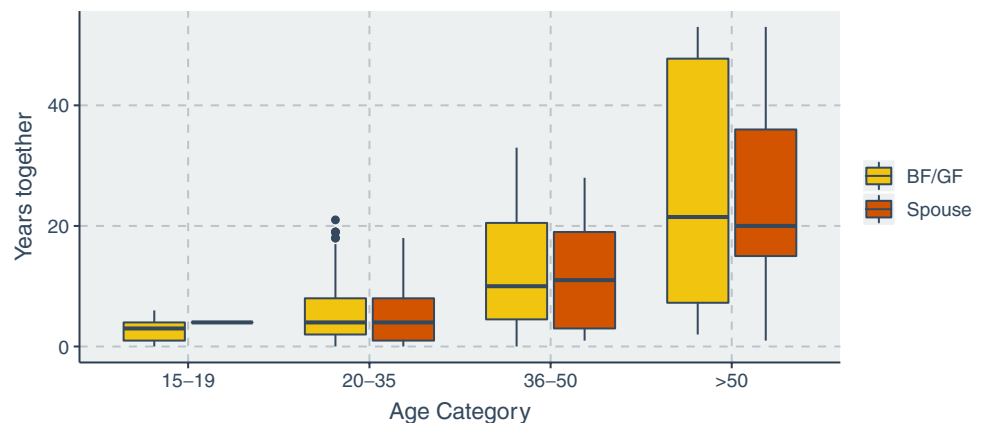
**Fig. 2** Concurrency in marital partnerships: raw proportion of relationships where the boyfriend or girlfriend is reported as married, separated by respondent sex

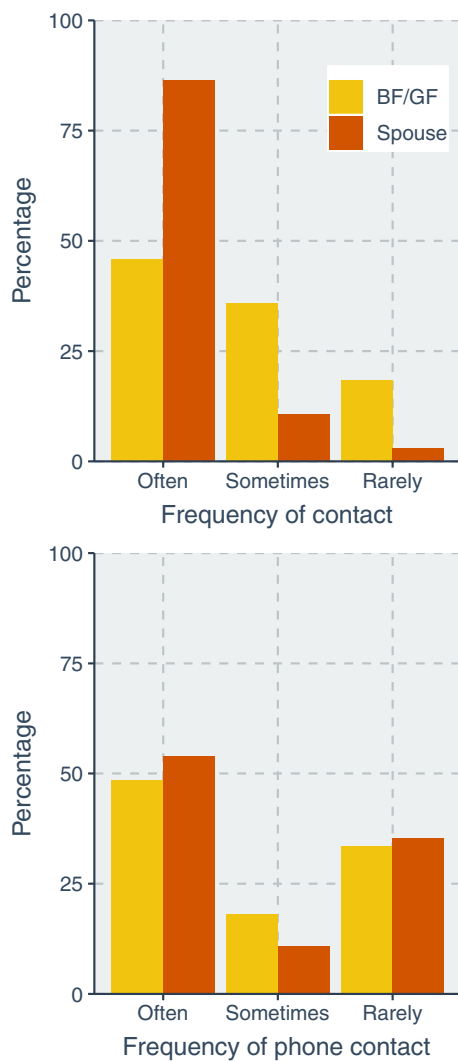
reliability (he/she would help me if I needed it) and future prospects (likely to still be together in a year) showed little variation, and no differences between marital and nonmarital partnerships (Fig. S4).

## Discussion

In examining the dynamics of extra-marital partnerships among Himba pastoralists, we find that these relationships play an important role in people's lives. Here we use ethnographic data from interviews and focus groups to provide context to the quantitative results reported above. In addition, we discuss our results in relation to broader theories of relationship dynamics, demonstrating how Himba exemplify behavior that while at first glance may seem like outliers, fits well within existing theories of mate choice and mating strategies.

**Fig. 1** Length of marital and nonmarital relationships. Boxplots illustrating reported number of years spent together by relationship type and age. For ease of interpretation, age was binned in this descriptive plot, while all other models and plots use age as a continuous variable. Boxplots show standard summary statistics of median, first and third quartiles, minimum and maximum values, and outliers





**Fig. 3** Contact frequency between marital and nonmarital partners: reported frequency of contact of partners broken down by partner type

### Similarities Between Marital and Nonmarital Partnerships

One of the most striking features of Himba extramarital relationships is their endurance. Many of the people we interviewed spoke about partnerships that have lasted decades, with older women frequently reporting relationships that began around menarche and lasted to menopause and beyond. One woman, speaking of a partner she has had for more than 40 years said, “I love him more than my [ex] husbands. And he is the same. So much. If he saw that I was having a problem, he would give something to me to help, because we have been together so long.” Men also spoke about these long-term extramarital partnerships, with one man in his seventies describing his relationship with a partner of over 50 years this way: “This one is very special, even though I have

more than 10 girlfriends. Other men used to even come and ask me for permission to have sex with her. She is like a wife to me but she had other husbands and I had other wives so we never married.” Another, invoking a sentiment reminiscent of marriage vows, said, “Only death will separate us.”

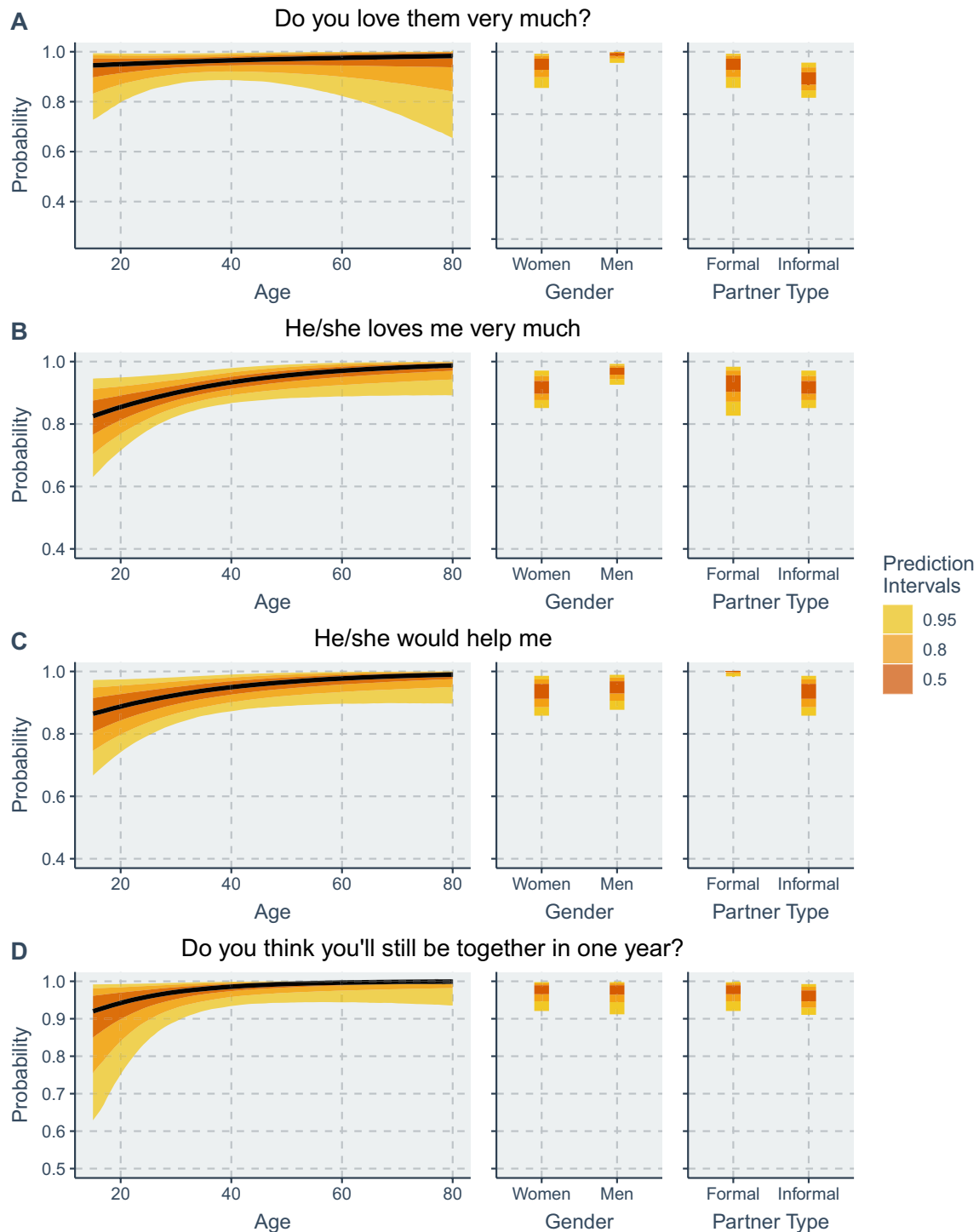
Himba report feeling deep emotional connections with both their spouses and their lovers, and often these feelings occur concurrently. One woman stated, “You can love your husband and still have another boyfriend. Even sometimes you love him [the husband] so much you embrace him when you are milking the cow. But then when he goes, you take the other.” These experiences starkly contrast most studies of extramarital partnerships, which are often described as a response to marital strife, or as an obstacle to its functioning.

Among Himba, concurrent partnerships are not generally seen as damaging to marriage or stemming from a troubled union. While some (particularly women) reported that their partners were very jealous, the majority of people we spoke to considered concurrency to be a regular practice which they accepted as part and parcel of marriage. One man described it this way, “You don’t want other people to sleep with your wife or girlfriend, but it is the tradition.” Some respondents went even further, stating that concurrency was an asset in a partner. One woman, when asked if her husband had many partners said, “He’s wanted. It’s a good thing. I don’t want to be with someone who’s not wanted.” Women at times will even facilitate relationships between their husbands and other women. One man said, “The husband, when he has a girlfriend, he can tell the wife. Sometimes your wife can tell you that another woman loves you. To make friendship between all three. They will have good communication and a good relationship.”

Despite the general norm of tolerance, however, we also heard stories of jealousy that resulted in both verbal and physical altercations between lovers and husbands. However, these tended to occur only after a series of polite warnings that a lover was visiting too often, or had otherwise overstayed his welcome. One man described, “When I am with one wife and another wife’s boyfriend comes, that is ok. But it’s when he stays for tea in the morning, that is when it really upsets me.” In some cases, however, jealousy was reported to end in physical altercations, putting both wives and their lovers in danger. On the whole, men are more likely than women to become intolerant of their partner’s concurrency. Likely because of this, whereas men often talk directly with their wives about their girlfriends, women tend to be more discreet about their extramarital partnerships to avoid conflict.

### Differences Between Marital and Nonmarital Partnerships

While the endurance and emotional resonance of marital and extramarital relationships are similar, the everyday



**Fig. 4** Relationship quality reports for marital and nonmarital partners: posterior predictions of the models showing effects of age, gender, and partner type on relationship quality reports. Probability out-

comes predict responses in the affirmative. We also report 50, 80, and 95% prediction intervals for each outcome, in red, orange, and yellow, respectively

enactment of these unions reveal some key differences in their form and function. Women typically co-reside with their husbands, although their highly mobile lifestyles mean that husbands and wives can be separated for weeks or months

at a time (Scelza et al., 2021). For married women, seeing their boyfriends then relies on two factors, whether they are currently co-resident with their husbands, and whether their boyfriends are in the area. While some Himba report that men

will visit their girlfriends when their husbands are home (and sleeping in the hut of a co-wife), typically visits occur when husbands are away. One woman explains, “When the husband goes to the cattle post, the other boys will come and be with her. And she will become pregnant. The husband he knows, but he will say nothing.” As women age, visits between lovers can become more sporadic, with some going years between sexual encounters.

Another key difference in the dynamics of marital and nonmarital relationships is the way in which resources are transferred. Spouses are viewed as primary sources of support and are almost invariably reported to be helpful in times of need (Fig. 4c). While informal partners score lower, they are also still widely viewed as reliable partners, and both men and women describe circuitous methods for ensuring that they can discretely help their partners when necessary. One woman reports, “He will sell the goat or cow and he will give the money to someone and send them to give it to me.” Similarly, a man explains, “You cannot give it straight to the woman if she is married. You give behind.... You can send it to her father or sister. Then when she goes there she gets it and she can say it was given by her family.” This helps to promote the respect and discrete behavior that Himba value in extramarital partnerships, while still allowing people to access help when it’s needed. While many women report that their boyfriends would help them in times of need, not all felt this way. A few stated that their boyfriends only gave them small trinkets or candy, and some reported that their boyfriends would be less likely to give them things because they were married. This reflects similar sentiments among men, who have stated that they would favor unmarried girlfriends over married ones.

The introduction of cell phones to the area over the last decade has undoubtedly changed the dynamics of extramarital partnerships. Phone contact patterns are almost identical for spouses and lovers, and have a more bimodal pattern (Fig. 3). Where individuals reported that they rarely spoke to their partners, it was often due to a technical limitation like not having a phone or someone being in an area without cell reception. When available though, the discretion of a cell phone likely allows for more frequent visits, fewer unexpected run-ins between husbands and lovers, and a better ability to request help when needed. It remains to be seen whether this added method of communication might change the nature of extramarital partnerships in other ways.

### Is Concurrency Adaptive for Himba?

These patterns of emotional attachment to extra-pair partners and jealousy, while substantially different from the norms of WEIRD cultures, largely conform to evolutionary theories of mate choice. Concurrent pair bonds may be adaptive when either the benefits of concurrency are high, the costs of

extra-pair paternity are minimized or the ability to prevent it (e.g., mate guarding) is limited (Scelza et al., 2021). The history and demography of Himba point to several ways in which these conditions may be met. First, Himba have a female-biased sex ratio, with about 0.75 women for every 1 man (Scelza et al., 2021), a trend which has existed since the early twentieth century (Gibson, 1959; Harpending & Pennington, 1990; Malcolm, 1924). Female biased adult sex ratios are predicted to be associated with less restrictive sexual norms because the costs to desertion for men are lower (Kokko & Jennions, 2008), a pattern that has received substantial empirical support in recent years (Jones & Ferguson, 2006; Arnocky et al., 2016; Schacht & Borgerhoff Mulder, 2015). Second, while Himba have a high rate of extra-pair paternity (Scelza et al., 2020), paternal investment in this population is limited by matrilineal wealth inheritance (Bollig, 2005) and fathers can offset losses with reputational gains from social fatherhood (Prall & Scelza, 2020b). Third, pastoralism in arid environments creates stochastic resource access which can be ameliorated by having additional resource partners (e.g., lovers), and we previously showed that women’s food security was greater when they had both a marital and non-marital partner (Scelza et al., 2021). Similar explanations for concurrency have been made for populations in South America that practice partible paternity (Hill & Hurtado, 2017; Walker et al., 2010). Finally, the pastoral system also necessitates long periods of spousal separation, which increases the costs of mate guarding. These features may also explain why jealousy tends to be dampened in this community. Jealous response (Buss et al., 1992; Geary et al., 1995; Scelza et al., 2018) and reproductive strategies more generally (Gangestad & Simpson, 2000; Owens & Thompson, 1994) are believed to be facultative responses, predicted to vary based on the costs to men of investing in other men’s children and the dynamics of the mating market. Here, these features of Himba sociodemography may be creating an environment where the benefits of concurrency outweigh the costs for both men and women, and having long-term, emotionally close relationships with multiple partners may be adaptive.

### Conclusion

The evidence we present here clearly shows that extramarital partners play an important role in the lives of Himba men and women. Lovers are not substitutes for husbands. As one woman said, “You can have boyfriends, but the husband must come first.” Women clearly view their husbands as primary, but boyfriends are often important sources of both instrumental and emotional support. Future data linking the demographic characteristics of nonmarital partnerships (e.g., length of relationship, number of children born) with resource transfers and child health outcomes could further explore whether this pattern has substantial benefits to women’s

fitness. For men, engaging in concurrency, and supporting both wives and lovers, may create a system of reciprocity of paternal investment. Future data parsing men's children across partner types and examining their investments could test this idea. In both cases, we do not necessarily expect that the patterns we see among Himba would (or should) replicate elsewhere. Rather, we have aimed to elucidate why concurrency may have become normatively accepted and practiced in this context. This work highlights the need to view extramarital partnerships with a locally appropriate cultural lens. Greater inclusion of these relationships in studies of marriage and family would provide a more accurate picture of social support and resource transfers where concurrency is common and help explain why concurrency varies around the world.

**Supplementary Information** The online version contains supplementary material available at <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10508-023-02553-2>.

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**Author's Contributions** Both authors contributed to the study conception and design, data collection and writing of the manuscript. Sean Prall prepared the data and conducted the analyses. Both authors read and approved the final manuscript.

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**Availability of Data and Material** Anonymized data will be available on OSF upon publication at <https://osf.io/4q3ne/>

**Code Availability** R code used for these analyses will be available on OSF upon publication at <https://osf.io/4q3ne/>.

## Declarations

**Conflicts of interest** Not applicable.

**Ethical Approval** This work was approved by the [Institution name here] Institutional Review Board (#10-000238). Community support was granted by the Chief of Omuhonga Basekama Ngombe. All participants provided oral consent.

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