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Women's Emotional Labor and Sacrifice in Romantic Relationships: Mankeeping

Romantik İlişkilerde Kadınların Duygusal Emeği ve Fedakarlığı: Erkeğe Bakım Verme

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to introduce the concept of "mankeeping" into the Turkish academic literature by examining the caregiving behaviors of female partners toward their male partners in romantic relationships within the context of the concepts of self-sacrifice and emotional labor. The concept of mankeeping considered an extension of the "kinkeeping" theory of maintaining family relationships, is structured by discussing its fundamental differences from the relevant theory. In this context, the concept is defined through three core components: providing emotional support, facilitating the receipt of support, and the emotional and temporal burdens associated with these processes. The findings indicate that women's caregiving behaviors toward their male partners in romantic relationships emerge as a means of addressing their partners' unmet needs. However, it is evident that the forms of caregiving women provide to their male partners, as well as the effects of these behaviors on both the relationship itself and the female partners, have not yet been sufficiently clarified. Therefore, there is a need for research examining the ways in which women compensate for deficiencies in men's social networks. Additionally, it is important to substantiate the effects of women's caregiving behaviors toward male partners on the quality of the romantic relationship with concrete data. Previous studies shed light on the possibility that these processes may be associated with psychological distress in female partners. The effects of the burden of caregiving on women have not yet been sufficiently researched. It is believed that studies in this area will offer significant contributions to mental health professionals in terms of strengthening men's social networks, supporting the well-being of female partners, and enhancing couple functionality in romantic relationships.

Keywords: Mankeeping, emotional labor, romantic relationships

ÖZ

Bu çalışma, romantik ilişkilerde kadın partnerlerin erkek partnerlerine yönelik bakım verme davranışlarını fedakârlık ve duygusal emek kavramları bağlamında inceleyerek "erkeğe bakım verme" (mankeeping) kavramını Türkçe alanyazına kazandırmayı amaçlamaktadır. Aile ilişkilerini sürdürme emeği (kinkeeping) teorisinin bir uzantısı olarak değerlendirilen erkeğe bakım verme kavramı, ilgili teoriden temel farklılıkları tartışılarak yapılandırılmıştır. Bu kapsamda kavram, duygusal destek sağlama, destek alımını kolaylaştırma ve bu süreçlerin beraberinde getirdiği duygusal ve zamansal yük olmak üzere üç temel bileşen üzerinden tanımlanmaktadır. Bulgular, romantik ilişkilerde kadınların erkek partnerlerine bakım verme davranışlarının, erkek partnerlerinin karşılanamayan ihtiyaçları giderme yönünde ortaya çıktığını göstermektedir. Bununla birlikte, kadınların erkek partnerlerine yönelik bakım verme biçimlerinin ve bu davranışların hem ilişkinin kendisinde hem de kadın partnerler üzerindeki etkilerinin henüz yeterince açıklığa kavuşmadığı görülmektedir. Bu nedenle, kadınların erkeklerin sosyal ağlarındaki eksiklikleri hangi yollarla telafi ettiklerini inceleyen araştırmalara ihtiyaç duyulmaktadır. Ayrıca, kadınların erkek partnerlerine yönelik bakım verme davranışlarının, romantik ilişkinin niteliği üzerindeki etkilerinin somut verilerle desteklenmesi önem taşımaktadır. Önceki çalışmalar, bu süreçlerin kadın partnerlerde psikolojik sıkıntıyla ilişkilendirilebileceğine yönelik ışık tutmaktadır. Partnere yönelik bakım verme yükünün kadınlar üzerindeki etkileri henüz yeterince araştırılmamıştır. Bu alanda yapılacak çalışmaların, erkeklerin sosyal ağlarının güçlendirilmesi, kadın partnerlerin iyi oluşlarının desteklenmesi ve romantik ilişkilerde çift işlevselliğinin artırılması açısından ruh sağlığı profesyonellerine önemli katkılar sunacağı düşünülmektedir.

Anahtar sözcükler: Erkeğe bakım verme, duygusal emek, romantik ilişkiler

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Introduction

In their social lives, individuals may exhibit behaviors based on both their biological sex and socially learned roles. While sex refers to the biological differences between women and men (Sayın 2007), gender denotes the culturally constructed roles and expectations attributed to womanhood and manhood (Segal, 1992). These roles provide a decisive framework for understanding individuals' behaviors and the distribution of responsibilities within relationships. In romantic relationships, women and men can exhibit both similar and different dynamics; the roles they assume within the relationship can be shaped by cultural expectations. In the traditional understanding of gender, men are typically positioned as the party assuming greater economic responsibilities, while women are seen as the party maintaining domestic order and relational processes (Basow 1992). However, these roles can be redefined over time through cultural transformations.

Marriage and romantic relationships are not merely economic or structural arrangements; they are also relational spaces where emotional needs are met and where a sense of belonging and intimacy is established (Üskül Engin 2008). In this context, it is emphasized that social-emotional behaviors and the interactions that sustain the relationship are significant for both the relationship and family life (Levenger 1964). It is emphasized that the roles and responsibilities partners assume in a relationship are not solely related to biological sex but are also linked to the culture they inhabit and learned gender roles (Erickson 2005).

Studies indicating that men's social support systems are more limited compared to women's are quite common in the literature (Szell and Thurner 2013). Global reports indicate that men's social networks have decreased disproportionately compared to women's in recent years (Cox 2021). Similarly, according to data from the Turkish Statistical Institute (TÜİK 2015), women visit friends more frequently than men and devote more time to their social lives. At this point, Ferrara and Vergara (2024) argue that men are at higher risk of loneliness and isolation compared to women, and that their female partners play a decisive role in their social networks. It is observed that women open up emotionally to their parents and peers more than men do (Papini et al. 1990). When considering the people with whom important topics are discussed, it is thought that men are more likely to include their spouses compared to women, while women are more likely to include their friends or other primary family members (Ferrara and Vergara 2024). Similarly, studies indicate that women engage in more emotional disclosure than men (Sultan and Chaudry 2008). Research also shows that women exhibit self-disclosure behaviors in online environments across a wider range of areas compared to men (Bond 2009). For example, a study by Li et al. (2019) demonstrates that individuals who engage in emotional disclosure anonymously in online environments are more likely to be perceived as women as their emotional sharing increases. This finding suggests that emotional needs are associated with gender. In this context, the "mankeeping theory" which posits that men's emotional needs are primarily met by their female partners, comes to the fore.

At this point, the current research seeks to answer the question: How can the phenomenon conceptualized as "mankeeping" in the international literature be framed within the Turkish academic context using the concept of "erkeğe bakım verme" and how should this concept be explained in heterosexual romantic relationships? The aim of this study is to address the discussions surrounding the concept of "mankeeping" through a literature review and to introduce this phenomenon into the Turkish academic literature using the concept of "erkeğe bakım verme"

Kinkeeping and Mankeeping

It is noted that the concept of mankeeping is framed based on Rosenthal's (1985) theory of "kinkeeping" (Ferrara and Vergara 2024). Family relationship maintenance labor is defined as the efforts expended to keep family members in communication with one another (Rosenthal 1985). Although it is observed that kinkeeping can be performed by both genders—women and men—it is generally regarded as a behavior specific to women and is thought to be passed down from mother to daughter (Ferrara and Vergara 2024). Distinguishing between the labor of maintaining family relationships and providing care for a male partner

appears to be of utmost importance. While the labor of maintaining family relationships is viewed as the emotional support women provide within the broader family context, it is understood that providing care for a male partner applies across different gender-based relationship contexts and does not require a kinship relationship (Ferrara and Vergara 2024). At this point, Ferrara and Vergara (2024) note that, unlike caregiving for relatives, women expend significant effort in helping men establish deeper social bonds. In this context, mankeeping is defined as the labor undertaken by female partners in romantic relationships to compensate for losses in male partners' social relationships and to alleviate their burden (Ferrara and Vergara 2024). It is considered extremely important to emphasize that emotional labor—exemplified by behaviors such as listening to a partner's problems or expressing gratitude—is not a negative act, and that when such labor is reciprocal, it yields positive outcomes for the relationship (Curran et al. 2015). On the other hand, the tension arising in the context of providing care to a male partner is largely shaped by the emotional labor undertaken by women. It is assumed that this situation may negatively impact women's relationship experiences and mental health, and limit the time they allocate to participation in areas outside of marital responsibilities. Consistent with this perspective, previous studies have sought to highlight the differences between women and men in terms of relationship maintenance. It has been demonstrated that the female gender role plays a significant role in relationship maintenance, serving as a predictor of conflict management, openness, positivity, task sharing, and social networks (Stafford et al. 2000).

In a family reunification program conducted in Denmark, it was anticipated that female partners migrating to Denmark would be able to establish social networks more quickly than men. Findings suggest that bringing women together with their partners benefits men's mental health through women's caregiving role toward men (Cour et al. 2025). On the other hand, the study does not address the emotional labor provided by women and its impact on their mental state. In summary, while the concept of mankeeping is approached within the framework of kinkeeping, it represents a distinct form of labor shaped within a gendered context specific to romantic relationships, independent of kinship ties. Although caregiving can be performed by both genders, the literature indicates that this behavior is largely attributed to women and has become normalized within the gender role of womanhood. Providing care to a male partner encompasses the intense emotional, temporal, and relational labor that women undertake to compensate for deficiencies in their male partners' social relationships; while this labor serves a protective function for the relationship when reciprocal, it poses risks to women's mental health, relationship experiences, and participation in other areas of life when it becomes one-sided. (Ferrara and Vergara 2024). Women's central roles in maintaining relationships and structuring social networks can yield supportive outcomes for men's mental health and well-being; however, it is observed that women's subjective experiences and psychological costs are not sufficiently addressed in this process. Therefore, a comprehensive examination of the emotional, temporal, and psychological consequences of mankeeping on women has the potential to fill a significant gap in the literature.

Framing the Mankeeping

In gender studies, terms such as emotional labor and efforts to maintain family bonds are frequently used to explain how gender inequality is reproduced within heterosexual relationships and family dynamics. However, these terms fall short of fully explaining the specific care and relationship-maintenance efforts women undertake in their close relationships with male partners. In this context, the concept of mankeeping stands out as a unique approach that complements existing understandings. Ferrara and Vergara (2024) aim to frame the concept of mankeeping as an extension of emotional labor and the labor of maintaining family relationships.

Mankeeping refers to the unseen efforts women undertake in romantic relationships to compensate for their male partners' weaknesses in their social lives and to sustain these connections (Ferrara and Vergara 2024). Unlike the labor of maintaining family relationships, this form of labor is not limited solely to kinship ties. It also encompasses the male partner's friendships, professional circles, and broader social connections. Therefore, mankeeping is proposed not merely as a general form of emotional labor, but as a relationship-specific and asymmetrical care practice emerging within a specific gender order.

It is understood that mankeeping is not a behavioral pattern stemming from women's natural or biological inclinations, but rather the result of a situation where men's abilities in emotional expression, social bonding, and relationship maintenance are structurally limited (Ferrara and Vergara 2024). Within this framework, mankeeping does not appear as an inevitable phenomenon in all male-female relationships. It is thought to become more pronounced particularly in situations where the male partner's social networks are weak and he has largely delegated emotional labor to his female partner.

The theoretical framework of the concept of mankeeping is examined through three interrelated yet conceptually distinct components (Ferrara and Vergara 2024). These components are structured to encompass both the process and the outcomes of mankeeping.

1. Providing Emotional Support

Providing emotional support to a male partner is understood as women offering deep emotional listening, empathy, and efforts at emotional regulation—elements that are generally not provided in other social relationships. The consistent provision of emotional access to the male partner's experiences of stress, loneliness, disappointment, or social isolation should be regarded as significant indicators.

Studies examining emotional labor between women and men are of great importance. Emotional labor is defined as efforts to enhance others' well-being and provide emotional support (Erickson 1993). Numerous studies demonstrate that emotional labor in romantic relationships yields positive outcomes for the relationship. For example, evidence suggests that it is positively associated with marital stability and satisfaction, and negatively associated with marital burnout (Erickson 1993, Holm et al. 2001, Wilcox and Nock 2006). These findings suggest that emotional labor undertaken in a relationship may serve a relationship-strengthening function under certain conditions. However, the literature also indicates that emotional labor does not always yield positive outcomes. In particular, negative relationship outcomes may arise in cases of an uneven distribution of emotional labor or excessive emotional labor. For example, it has been observed that men report lower levels of love and commitment when exposed to excessive emotional labor (Curran et al. 2015). Similarly, it has been found that when women perceive they receive less emotional labor than they give in a relationship, they feel less loved and report more depressive symptoms (Strazdins and Broom 2004). Additionally, it has been shown that heterosexual couples report more conflict regarding emotional labor compared to same-sex couples (Umberson et al. 2015). In conclusion, while emotional labor is an important process in romantic relationships that supports others' well-being and can enhance relationship satisfaction, the level and reciprocity of this labor appear to be decisive factors in relational outcomes. The literature indicates that emotional labor provided in a balanced and reciprocal manner enhances marital stability and satisfaction, whereas when it is excessive or one-sided, it is associated with negative emotional outcomes for both men and women (Strazdins and Broom 2004, Wilcox and Nock 2006). It has been observed that men experience fluctuations in their levels of love and attachment when exposed to intense emotional labor, while women feel less loved and report higher levels of depressive symptoms when they do not receive reciprocation for the emotional labor they provide. Furthermore, the fact that conflicts stemming from emotional labor are more pronounced in heterosexual relationships points to the inequality in the emotional labor burden borne by women in these relationships. In this context, the intensification of the emotional labor women provide to male partners—which often goes unrequited—is viewed as a dynamic that could pose risks to both women's psychological well-being and the sustainability of the relationship.

2. Efforts to Facilitate Access to Support

The efforts made to facilitate access to support can be understood as encompassing the active and guiding behaviors women adopt to help their male partners maintain and develop their social connections. Examples include organizing social interactions, revitalizing the male partner's friendships, encouraging participation in social groups, and managing these processes. From this perspective, the effort in question suggests that it may entail not only an emotional burden but also organizational and time-related demands.

Caregiving behaviors toward men can be viewed as part of women's unilateral self-sacrifice when such care is not reciprocated by men toward women. Individuals acting to prioritize their partner's well-being or delaying their own actions are associated with perceptions of being in a healthy relationship and relationship satisfaction (Vangelisti et al. 2002). On the other hand, the outcomes of self-sacrificing actions toward the relationship or partner may vary depending on the reactions of the other partner in the relationship. Young and Curran (2024) note that when an individual perceives their partner is aware of the sincere sacrifices made for them, this benefits both the individual and the partner by reducing conflict; conversely, when sacrifices are not appreciated by the partner, this is associated with lower levels of satisfaction. Thus, it suggests that self-sacrifice is an action with a structure that can negatively affect the parties in a romantic relationship within the dynamics in which it occurs. Lin and colleagues (2016) state that individuals in romantic relationships who suppress their own needs for their partner's well-being are associated with lower marital satisfaction and higher depressive symptoms. On the other hand, when individuals' acts of self-sacrifice are perceived by their partners, this is associated with higher commitment and satisfaction for both the partner and the individual making the sacrifice, while also being linked to lower levels of ambivalence. In light of these studies, it is suggested that when caregiving behaviors toward men lack reciprocity, they may become part of a pattern of one-sided self-sacrifice from the women's perspective. Although self-sacrifice is linked to relationship satisfaction and positive relationship perceptions in healthy relationships, it is understood that the effects of this behavior on the relationship largely depend on the partner's ability to recognize and appreciate these acts of self-sacrifice (Young and Curran 2024). While the recognition and appreciation of acts of self-sacrifice are associated with positive outcomes, a lack of appreciation is linked to more negative outcomes (Lin et al. 2016). In this context, while self-sacrificing behaviors aimed at caring for a male partner may be understandable within family and relationship norms, the reciprocity of these behaviors and the reactions of the partner receiving care are likely to play a decisive role in both individual well-being and the sustainability of the relationship.

3. Emotional and Temporal Burden

The emotional and temporal burden refers to the cost incurred when caregiving behaviors lack the principle of mutual benefit. Women's sacrifices regarding their own independence, personal time, and mental health are addressed within this dimension. This burden increases as caregiving becomes a constant and takes on a one-sided form, potentially creating negative effects on relationship satisfaction and psychological well-being.

It is believed that psychological distress may be one of the anticipated negative outcomes women may experience as a result of caregiving behaviors toward men. Previous literature indicates that the question of whether psychological distress varies by gender has been examined through various dynamics. Studies investigating whether psychological distress differs by gender suggest that such differences are influenced by contextual factors. Emslie and colleagues (2002) note that gender differences in psychological distress are shaped within a specific period, social context, or socio-cultural environment. However, findings indicate that women report higher levels of psychological distress compared to men. For example, Almeida and Kessler (1998) found that women reported a greater number of distressing days and fewer distress-free days compared to men. They also suggested that this difference might be related to women's exposure to life events that could generate more stress. Similarly, studies conducted in various countries also indicate that women experience higher levels of psychological distress compared to men (Cleary and Mechanic 1983, Doherty and Kartalova-O'Doherty 2010). However, when the nature of this difference is examined, it becomes evident that gender-specific role expectations play a decisive role. Matud et al. (2015), while supporting the finding that women report higher levels of psychological distress, note that men's psychological distress is more closely linked to dissatisfaction with their work roles; whereas women's distress is associated with spending more time on child care and less time on personally fulfilling activities. These findings suggest that psychological distress is closely linked not to gender itself, but to the distribution of roles and responsibilities attributed to gender. On the other hand, the fact that caregiving behavior toward a partner is often one-sided and frequent from women toward male partners is not viewed as a situation where only women will face negative outcomes. It is anticipated that the

relationship itself will also be negatively affected by these dynamics. In line with this view, it is noted that in relationships with high marital satisfaction, partners tend to exhibit lower levels of psychological distress (Waltz et al. 1988). This finding suggests that the quality of the marital relationship may play a protective role in individuals' psychological well-being. Indeed, studies exist showing that psychological distress is influenced not only by individual characteristics but also by structural and relational conditions. For example, research highlighting the relationship between social inequalities and psychological distress demonstrates that an individual's social position is a determining factor in mental health (Talala et al. 2008; Byles et al. 2012). In this context, gender-based inequalities within the home also emerge as a significant source of relational stress. It has been reported that gender inequality within the home is a significant predictor of psychological distress in both women and men (Harryson et al. 2012). Similarly, it is noted that the quality of marital roles is negatively associated with psychological distress, and this relationship does not show significant differences based on gender (Barnett et al. 1994).

Consequently, it is believed that addressing women's tendency to report psychological distress—not through the lens of individual vulnerabilities but within the context of gender roles, caregiving responsibilities, and structural inequalities within relationships—offers a more comprehensive and explanatory approach. This perspective contributes to making women's psychological distress visible while also providing a crucial foundation for preventive and interventionist efforts aimed at restructuring relational processes.

An Assessment of Gender Differences in Romantic Relationships through the Lens of Self-Sacrifice and Emotional Labor

Strazdins and Broom (2004) note that when emotional labor performed for the well-being of family members is shared equally, both men and women can benefit from the family's emotional resources; however, they also add that emotional labor, such as housework and child care, may exhibit gender differences. At this point, it becomes clear that gender differences can also be observed in self-sacrificing behaviors. Whitton et al. (2007) noted that even when women engage in self-sacrifice on days when they experience more problems, this is associated with a decline in relationship quality among male partners, and they stated that the relationship between relationship commitment and the perceived harmfulness of self-sacrifice is stronger in men than in women. Similarly, it has been found that men exhibit greater feelings of love on days when their partners invest more emotional labor than average, compared to women (Curran et al. 2015). Thus, there is evidence supporting men's positive perceptions of self-sacrificing behaviors.

It is thought that gender differences in self-sacrificing behaviors may also be influenced by gender norms. In other words, the literature suggests a perception that women invest more in romantic relationships than men, and reports indicate that women exhibit self-sacrificing behaviors more frequently than men (Miller 1986, Ahmed and Shaheen 2013). The fact that women exhibit more self-sacrificing behavior can create a burden for them when the costs associated with such behavior are taken into account (Whitton et al. 2007). Another reason is that, in a context where women are evaluated more strictly than men, they may receive less appreciation and gratitude for their behaviors compared to men (Zoppolat et al. 2020). While these studies indicate that women are more inclined to engage in self-sacrificing behavior, they also provide data suggesting that women may experience fewer positive emotions due to factors such as increased workload and reduced recognition in this regard (Righetti et al. 2020). At this point, it is understood that when caregiving behaviors are one-sided and frequent, partners may experience negative consequences, and this situation may pose a threat to both their relationship and their own well-being. Similarly, this situation is summarized by Strazdins and Broom (2004) with the idea that those who exert less effort in the relationship may not be affected or may even benefit in the short term, while those who exert more effort may face various challenges. In summary, the literature indicates that emotional labor and self-sacrificing behaviors are distributed unequally based on gender in romantic relationships. When societal gender norms expect women to make greater investments and sacrifices, this leads to the normalization of such behaviors and their loss of visibility, thereby posing a risk to women's well-being. In this context,

the unilateral and sustained maintenance of caregiving and self-sacrificing behaviors can disrupt relational balance, thereby threatening the psychological well-being of both the relationship and the partner who bears the burden of self-sacrifice.

Conclusion

This study focuses on a relationship dynamic that has been examined only to a limited extent in the literature, by examining female partners' caregiving behaviors toward male partners within the context of romantic relationships through the concepts of self-sacrifice and emotional labor. The findings shed light on how emotional and social needs that male partners cannot meet due to gaps in their social networks are often taken on by female partners and tolerated through caregiving behaviors. It is understood that this caregiving process has become an important part of the relationship's dynamics, yet it is often maintained in an implicit manner.

While the current research aims to establish the foundational framework for the concept of mankeeping, it has certain limitations. Behaviors related to mankeeping have primarily been examined within the context of heterosexual romantic relationships. This limits the generalizability of findings regarding how dynamics operate for individuals with different sexual orientations or relationship forms. Future studies are encouraged to conduct comparative research on caregiving patterns within alternative relationship forms. Second, the scarcity of studies on caregiving behaviors toward men offers a narrow perspective in analyzing the meanings and ways these practices are maintained across various cultures. Therefore, it is of great importance for future research to distinguish the cultural dimensions of male caregiving behaviors through cross-cultural comparisons. The current study aimed to establish a conceptual framework for male caregiving behaviors. Studies based on empirical data have sought to present variables associated with this behavioral pattern. This situation poses a challenge in terms of measuring the concept of mankeeping and determining its causal relationships with various variables. It is anticipated that future research could examine caregiving processes for men in greater depth by utilizing scale development, qualitative interviews, and longitudinal design methods.

It is anticipated that the findings will serve as an important guide for professionals working with couples in the field of mental health. Particularly in couple therapy and relationship counseling processes, by addressing the reciprocity, boundaries, and emotional burden of caregiving behaviors, it may be possible to support more balanced and functional relationship patterns. In conclusion, comprehensive interventions aimed at developing men's social networks and safeguarding the psychological well-being of female partners are considered a significant step toward enhancing couple functionality in romantic relationships.

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