



Personality features and mate retention strategies: Honesty–humility and the willingness to manipulate, deceive, and exploit romantic partners



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ABSTRACT

Personality features are associated with several relationship outcomes. We examined whether specific personality features differed in their associations with “mate retention” strategies. We examined the unique associations that personality features had with mate retention strategies reported by 179 community members in romantic relationships for at least 6 months. Personality features were associated with each of the mate retention strategies such that positive personality features (e.g., high levels of honesty–humility) were associated with less reliance on mate retention strategies that involved manipulating, deceiving, or exploiting romantic partners. Discussion focuses on the implications of these results for understanding the connection between personality features and behaviors intended to preserve and maintain romantic relationships.

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1. Introduction

Romantic relationships are a central aspect of the lives of many individuals. When these relationships are healthy, they can be sources of happiness, feelings of warmth, and a sense of belonging. However, if these relationships deteriorate, they can become sources of frustration, stress, and anxiety. Given the importance of romantic relationships and their implications for psychological well-being, it is easy to see why individuals often invest significant time and resources in the maintenance of their relationships. Many strategies employed by individuals to maintain their relationships focus on preventing their partner from defecting from the relationship or being poached by romantic rivals. For example, individuals may attempt to monopolize their partner's time or they may slander their potential competitors (Buss, 1988; Buss & Shackelford, 1997). These mate retention behaviors require conscious effort and individuals are likely to differ in their willingness to engage in such behaviors. For example, someone who is more honest may find it troubling to lie about a potential competitor or break into their romantic partner's e-mail account to read their recent messages, whereas someone who is less honest may have fewer concerns about these sorts of behaviors.

These relationship maintenance behaviors are known as *mate retention tactics* (Buss, 1988; Buss & Shackelford, 1997) and range

“from vigilance to violence” (Buss, 1988, p. 291). These tactics are often assessed using instruments such as the Mate Retention Inventory (MRI; Buss, 1988; Buss, Shackelford, & McKibbin, 2008) which provides a detailed listing of each mate retention behavior. Mate retention tactics range from relatively positive behaviors such as bestowing gifts on the partner to negative behaviors such as violence directed toward the partner or potential romantic rivals. Furthermore, these tactics include behaviors that are both intersexual (i.e., directed toward the romantic partner) and intrasexual (i.e., directed toward potential competitors). There are 19 specific tactics captured by the MRI, which include behaviors such as mate concealment, possessive ornamentation, and violence against rivals (see Shackelford, Goetz, & Buss, 2005 for a review). These 19 tactics are then grouped into five broader mate retention strategies: direct guarding (i.e., vigilance, concealment of mate, and monopolization of time), intersexual negative inducements (i.e., jealousy induction, punish mate's infidelity threat, emotional manipulation, commitment manipulation, and derogation of competitors), positive inducements (i.e., resource display, sexual inducements, appearance enhancement, love and care, and submission and debasement), public signals of possession (i.e., verbal possession signals, physical possession signals, and possessive ornamentation), and intrasexual negative inducements (i.e., derogation of mate, intrasexual threats, and violence against rivals).

Mate retention strategies are prevalent in various samples including undergraduate populations (e.g., Buss, 1988), newlyweds (e.g., Buss & Shackelford, 1997; Shackelford et al., 2005), and married couples (Kaighobadi, Shackelford, & Buss, 2010). These

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mate retention strategies are associated with various aspects of romantic relationships including violence toward one's partner (Kaighobadi, Shackelford, & Goetz, 2009), frequency of sexual intercourse with one's partner (Kaighobadi & Shackelford, 2008; Shackelford, Goetz, Guta, & Schmitt, 2006), and interest in performing oral sex on one's partner (Pham & Shackelford, 2013). This literature suggests that examining mate retention strategies can provide valuable insight into the functioning of romantic relationships.

The connections between personality features and mate retention strategies have only been examined in a few studies. de Miguel and Buss (2011) found that mate retention strategies had unique associations with each dimension of the Five-Factor model of personality. The strongest associations emerged for neuroticism and agreeableness such that neuroticism was positively associated with the direct guarding and intersexual negative inducements strategies, whereas agreeableness was negatively associated with the use of direct guarding, intersexual negative inducements, and intrasexual negative inducements. Conscientiousness was positively associated with the use of positive inducements. Extraversion was associated with intersexual negative inducements, positive inducements, and public signals of possession. Finally, openness was negatively associated with direct guarding but positively associated with the use of positive inducements.

The connections between the Dark Triad of personality (i.e., narcissism, Machiavellianism, and psychopathy; Paulhus & Williams, 2002) and mate retention strategies have also been examined. The aspects of the Dark Triad capture the extent to which individuals feel entitled, manipulate others, and are willing to exploit others to achieve their goals. Previous results show that the Dark Triad are associated with specific mate retention tactics, including jealousy inducement, emotional manipulation, and verbal possession signals (Jonason, Li, & Buss, 2010). The results of de Miguel and Buss (2011) and Jonason and colleagues (2010) suggest that personality features are associated with the mate retention strategies that individuals employ to preserve and maintain their romantic relationships.

1.1. Overview and predictions

The purpose of the present research was to extend what is known about the connections between personality features and mate retention strategies. Although the Five-Factor model has been the most prominent means for conceptualizing personality traits in the last few decades (Digman, 1990), the HEXACO model of personality (Ashton & Lee, 2007; Lee & Ashton, 2004) has received considerable attention in recent years. Six factors comprise the HEXACO model: variants of the dimensions from the Five-Factor model as well as an honesty–humility dimension. The honesty–humility dimension captures the degree to which individuals exhibit fairness, sincerity, and modesty. The honesty–humility dimension of personality has unique associations with other variables when controlling for the other five dimensions. For example, the honesty–humility dimension has unique associations with Machiavellianism, narcissism, and psychopathy (Ashton & Lee, 2007; Lee & Ashton, 2005), acts of revenge (Lee & Ashton, 2012a), socio-political attitudes (Lee, Ashton, Ogunfowora, Bourdage, & Shin, 2010), anti-social behavior in the workplace (Lee, Ashton, & Shin, 2005), and sexual harassment (Lee, Gizzarone, & Ashton, 2003). We used the HEXACO model of personality because it includes the honesty–humility dimension which may provide insight into important aspects of personality that are not adequately captured by the Five-Factor Model (Lee & Ashton, 2012b) but which may be vital for understanding mate retention behavior.

We expected that the honesty–humility dimension of personality would be negatively associated with the use of the mate

retention strategies that involve manipulating, deceiving, or exploiting one's romantic partner because individuals who score higher on the honesty–humility dimension are less prone to manipulating, deceiving, or exploiting other individuals in general (see Lee & Ashton, 2012b for a review). Our prediction is consistent with previous research indicating that personality features such as narcissism, Machiavellianism, and psychopathy – which are closely associated with a willingness to manipulate, deceive, and exploit others – are associated with mate retention strategies that involve negative behaviors targeted at one's romantic partner or potential romantic rivals (Jonason et al., 2010).

We expected to replicate previous findings for the remaining five dimensions of personality (e.g., de Miguel & Buss, 2011). That is, we expected emotionality to be positively associated with the direct guarding and intersexual negative inducements strategies, whereas agreeableness would be negatively associated with the use of direct guarding, intersexual negative inducements, and intrasexual negative inducements. We expected conscientiousness to be positively associated with the use of positive inducements and extraversion to be positively associated with intersexual negative inducements, positive inducements, and public signals of possession. Finally, we expected openness to be negatively associated with direct guarding but positively associated with the use of positive inducements.

2. Material and methods

2.1. Participants and procedure

One hundred and eighty one participants were recruited using Amazon's Mechanical Turk (MTurk; see Buhrmester, Kwang, & Gosling, 2011 for a review of data collection using MTurk). To be eligible for participation, participants must have been involved in a committed, heterosexual, romantic relationship for at least 6 months. Of the 181 participants, two failed to provide complete data and were excluded from our analyses. This left a final sample of 179 participants (99 women, 80 men). The mean age of the participants was 32.77 years ($SD = 10.66$) and their racial/ethnic composition was 76% white, 7% Hispanic, 7% Asian, 7% black, and 3% other. The relationship status of our participants was 39% married, 2% engaged, 26% cohabitating, and 33% seriously dating. The average length of the relationships was 84.7 months (approximately seven years). Participants were asked to complete measures concerning their personality features and their mate retention behaviors along with other measures not relevant to the present study.

2.2. Measures

2.2.1. HEXACO-60

The HEXACO-60 (Ashton & Lee, 2009) assesses basic personality dimensions. The HEXACO-60 provides measures of personality across six dimensions: honesty–humility (10 items; e.g. "I would never accept a bribe, even if it were very large" [$\alpha = .77$]), Emotionality (10 items; e.g. "I sometimes can't help worrying about little things" [$\alpha = .79$]), Extraversion (10 items; e.g. "The first thing that I always do in a new place is to make friends" [$\alpha = .85$]), Agreeableness (10 items; e.g. "I rarely hold a grudge, even against people who have badly wronged me" [$\alpha = .82$]), Conscientiousness (10 items; "I plan ahead and organize things, to avoid scrambling at the last minute" [$\alpha = .82$]), and Openness (10 items; "People have often told me that I have a good imagination" [$\alpha = .79$]). The HEXACO-60 has been found to possess adequate psychometric properties in previous studies (e.g., Lee & Ashton, 2004).

2.2.2. Mate Retention Inventory

Mate retention behaviors were assessed using the Mate Retention Inventory – Short Form (Buss et al., 2008). This instrument assesses 19 mate retention tactics that can be grouped into five broader mate retention strategies: direct guarding (6 items; e.g. “Called to make sure my partner was where she said she would be” [$\alpha = .72$]), intersexual negative inducements (10 items; e.g. “Talked to another woman at a party to make my partner jealous” [$\alpha = .66$]), positive inducements (10 items; e.g. “Complimented my partner on her appearance” [$\alpha = .69$]), public signals of possession (6 items; “Put my arm around my partner in front of others” [$\alpha = .70$]), and intrasexual negative inducements (6 items; e.g. “Stared coldly at a man who was looking at my partner” [$\alpha = .61$]). To administer this instrument simultaneously to men and women, the original gender-oriented pronouns were changed to gender-neutral pronouns (e.g., “Bragged about my partner to other men” was changed to “Bragged about my partner to other people”). The Mate Retention Inventory has been shown to possess adequate psychometric properties and to be a valid measure of mate retention behaviors (e.g., Buss et al., 2008; Shackelford et al., 2005).

3. Results

The means, standard deviations, and intercorrelations are presented in Table 1. The correlation matrix revealed associations between the personality features and the mate retention strategies. More specifically, honesty–humility was negatively correlated with direct guarding, intersexual negative inducements, and intrasexual negative inducements. Emotionality was positively correlated with direct guarding and intersexual negative inducements. Extraversion was negatively correlated with intersexual negative inducements. Agreeableness was negatively correlated with direct guarding, intersexual negative inducements, and intrasexual negative inducements. Conscientiousness was negatively associated with direct guarding, intersexual negative inducements, and intrasexual negative inducements. Finally, openness was negatively associated with direct guarding, intersexual negative inducements, and intrasexual negative inducements. None of the personality features were correlated with positive inducements or public signals of possession.

Multiple regression analyses were conducted to determine the unique associations between each dimension of personality and the mate retention strategies. We conducted hierarchical multiple regression analyses in which each mate retention strategy was regressed onto honesty–humility, emotionality, extraversion,

agreeableness, conscientiousness, openness, and sex (0 = female, 1 = male). We included sex in these analyses given previous research documenting sex differences in the use of mate retention tactics such that men are more likely to perform tactics such as resource display and intrasexual threats, whereas women are more likely to perform tactics such as appearance enhancement and verbal signals of possession (e.g., Buss, 1988; Buss & Shackelford, 1997; de Miguel & Buss, 2011). In our preliminary analyses, we entered sex as a potential moderator of the associations between personality dimensions and mate retention strategies but no significant interactions emerged. In the interest of parsimony, we removed these interaction terms from the reported analyses. The results of the final analyses are presented in Table 2.

3.1. Direct guarding

The analysis concerning direct guarding found negative associations for honesty–humility ($\beta = -.17, t = -2.29, p = .02$), conscientiousness ($\beta = -.24, t = -3.32, p = .001$), and openness ($\beta = -.26, t = -3.76, p < .001$) such that individuals who reported higher scores on these personality dimensions were less likely to engage in direct guarding of their romantic partners. In addition, a positive association emerged for emotionality ($\beta = .16, t = 2.20, p = .03$) indicating that those higher in emotionality may be more likely to engage in direct guarding.

3.2. Intersexual negative inducements

The analysis concerning intersexual negative inducements revealed negative associations for honesty–humility ($\beta = -.21, t = -2.87, p = .01$), agreeableness ($\beta = -.21, t = -3.00, p = .003$), conscientiousness ($\beta = -.17, t = -2.32, p = .02$), and openness ($\beta = -.21, t = -3.09, p = .002$). This suggests that individuals who report higher scores on these personality dimensions may be less likely to use intersexual negative inducements. Emotionality was positively associated with the use of intersexual negative inducements ($\beta = .20, t = 2.65, p = .01$) such that those with higher levels of emotionality were more likely to use intersexual negative inducements.

3.3. Positive inducements

The analysis concerning positive inducements indicated that honesty–humility was negatively associated with the use of positive inducements ($\beta = -.16, t = -2.01, p = .05$) which shows that individuals with higher scores for honesty–humility were less

Table 1
Intercorrelations and descriptive statistics for personality, mate retention, and sex.

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12
1 Honesty–humility	–											
2 Emotionality	.01	–										
3 Extraversion	.14	–.32***	–									
4 Agreeableness	.33***	–.16*	.32***	–								
5 Conscientiousness	.36***	–.12	.26***	.23**	–							
6 Openness	.10	–.14	.16*	.08	.28***	–						
7 Direct guarding	–.30***	.21*	–.11	–.24*	–.39***	–.36***	–					
8 Intersexual negative inducements	–.37***	.24*	–.19*	–.35***	–.37***	–.31***	.68***	–				
9 Positive inducements	–.13	.06	.03	.11	.01	–.10	.16*	.28***	–			
10 Public signals	–.06	.04	.14	.05	–.05	–.13	.18*	.35***	.59***	–		
11 Intrasexual negative inducements	–.31***	.06	–.11	–.28***	–.33***	–.25**	.60***	.65***	.14	.23**	–	
12 Sex	.17*	–.40***	.06	.08	–.08	–.01	–.02	.02	.26***	.24**	.05	–
M	3.37	3.19	3.06	3.24	3.77	3.68	0.52	0.69	1.77	1.42	0.37	–
SD	0.72	0.69	0.71	0.66	0.65	0.69	0.55	0.48	0.46	0.56	0.43	–

* $p < .05$.** $p < .01$.*** $p < .001$.

Table 2
Regressions of mate retention strategies on personality features and sex.

	Direct guarding		Intersexual negative inducements		Positive inducements		Public signals		Intrasexual negative inducements	
	R ²	β	R ²	β	R ²	β	R ²	β	R ²	β
Model	.29***		.32***		.14***		.13**		.21***	
Honesty–humility		–.17*		–.21**		–.16*		–.02		–.16*
Emotionality		.16†		.20**		.23**		.21*		.03
Extraversion		.09		.04		.05		.21**		.05
Agreeableness		–.11		–.21**		.13		.02		–.18*
Conscientiousness		–.24**		–.17†		.09		–.01		–.20*
Openness		–.26***		–.21**		–.08		–.13		–.17*
Sex		.00		.07		.31***		.30***		.03

† $p < .05$.

** $p < .01$.

*** $p < .001$.

likely to report using positive inducements. Emotionality ($\beta = .23$, $t = 2.82$, $p = .01$) and sex ($\beta = .31$, $t = 3.94$, $p < .001$) were positively associated with use of positive inducements such that positive inducements were more likely to be used by men and those who are highly emotional.

3.4. Public signals of possession

The analysis concerning public signals of possession revealed significant positive associations for emotionality ($\beta = .21$, $t = 2.50$, $p = .01$), extraversion ($\beta = .21$, $t = 2.63$, $p = .01$), and sex ($\beta = .30$, $t = 3.79$, $p < .001$) such that public signals of possession are more likely to be used by men as well as those with high levels of emotionality or extraversion.

3.5. Intrasexual negative inducements

The analysis concerning intrasexual negative inducements found significant negative associations for honesty–humility ($\beta = -.16$, $t = -2.12$, $p = .04$), agreeableness ($\beta = -.18$, $t = -2.33$, $p = .02$), conscientiousness ($\beta = -.20$, $t = -2.54$, $p = .01$), and openness ($\beta = -.17$, $t = -2.29$, $p = .02$). These results show that individuals with high scores on each of these personality dimensions were less likely to report utilizing intrasexual negative inducements.

4. Discussion

The present study investigated the connections between personality features and the strategies that individuals use to preserve and maintain their romantic relationships. More specifically, we were interested in determining whether personality traits would predict the use of particular mate retention strategies. We were especially interested in the honesty–humility dimension of personality because it is associated with measures of the Dark Triad (Lee & Ashton, 2005) and may capture the extent to which individuals are willing to manipulate, deceive, and exploit others (Lee & Ashton, 2012b). Further, Dark Triad traits have been shown to be associated with mate poaching and mate guarding (Jonason et al., 2010). Honesty–humility was negatively associated with the mate retention strategies of direct guarding, intersexual negative inducements, positive inducements, and intrasexual negative inducements. This suggests that individuals who scored higher on honesty–humility were less willing to engage in mate retention that involved manipulating, deceiving, or exploiting their romantic partners. This is consistent with previous findings suggesting that individuals with high levels of honesty–humility are more likely to treat others fairly and to have difficulty lying (Lee & Ashton, 2012b). In contrast, individuals with low levels of honesty–humil-

ity appear willing to engage in a wide range of negative behaviors to preserve and maintain their romantic relationships. For example, many of the tactics that comprise intersexual negative inducements involve the manipulation of the partner's emotions and commitment (e.g., “Pleaded that I could not live without my partner”). Individuals with low levels of honesty–humility may use emotional manipulation in other domains of their lives so it may be relatively easy for them to extend this behavior to their romantic relationships. This pattern of results is consistent with those of Jonason and colleagues (2010) which found aspects of the Dark Triad – which are each negatively correlated with honesty–humility (Lee & Ashton, 2005) – to be associated with these sorts of mate retention behaviors.

The honesty–humility dimension of personality was negatively associated with positive inducements which may be due to the importance that individuals with high scores on this dimension place on fairness and honesty. That is, we suspect that this negative association emerged because those with scores on the honesty–humility dimension were less likely to engage in positive inducements as a way to manipulate their partner (e.g., buying them expensive gifts or giving them undeserved compliments to keep them interested in the relationship). This is consistent with the view of individuals with high scores on the honesty–humility dimension as “scrupulously fair” (Lee & Ashton, 2012b, p. 20). It would be helpful if future research further examined the connection between the honesty–humility dimension and the willingness of individuals to engage in displays of affection and resources because this may build on the results of the present study.

The importance placed on honesty by individuals with high scores on the honesty–humility dimension allows others to develop a sense of trust in these individuals and foster a willingness to cooperate with them (Lee & Ashton, 2012b). Therefore, if individuals with high scores on the honesty–humility dimension are in romantic relationships with others who had at least moderate scores on this dimension, then it is likely that a sense of communal trust may develop which may negate the need for the use of direct guarding tactics. In contrast, individuals with low scores on the honesty–humility dimension would have much more difficulty developing a sense of communal trust, which may provide at least a partial explanation for their elevated levels of mate retention behaviors. It has been shown that when seeking long-term mates, a great deal of importance is placed on honesty (e.g., Buss & Barnes, 1986). That is, honesty may be serving an important role in selecting a long-term mate. This may be due to individuals valuing honesty in potential long-term mates in order to avoid becoming subject to an array of negative mate retention tactics. It is important for future research in this area to examine the role of these dyadic processes in predicting the use of mate retention behaviors as well as the consequences of these behaviors for the satisfaction of the individuals involved in the relationship.

Our findings for the remaining five personality dimensions are consistent with the results of de Miguel and Buss (2011). For example, de Miguel and Buss found agreeableness to be negatively associated with direct guarding, intersexual negative inducements, and intrasexual negative inducements. In our study, agreeableness was negatively associated with intersexual negative inducements and intrasexual negative inducements but not with direct guarding. Further, neuroticism was positively associated with direct guarding and intersexual negative inducements in the study reported by de Miguel and Buss. In our study, emotionality – which takes the place of neuroticism in the HEXACO model (Lee & Ashton, 2012b) – was positively associated with direct guarding, intersexual negative inducements, positive inducements, and public signals of possession. It is also interesting to note that the associations that emotionality had with positive inducements and public signals of possession were stronger in the regression models – which controlled for the other HEXACO dimensions and sex – than the zero-order correlations. This suggests that emotionality and sex may be serving as mutual suppressors (see Paulhus, Robins, Trzesniewski, & Tracy, 2004 for a review of suppressor effects). This is consistent with the fact that men engage in more positive inducements and public signals of possession whereas women report higher levels of emotionality (Lee & Ashton, 2012b). These results show considerable consistency between our results and those of de Miguel and Buss with the novel finding that emotionality and sex may serve as mutual suppressors.

It should also be noted that the current findings place personality within the larger context of social processes. Often, personality and social processes are discussed as separate phenomena. This separation ignores the dynamic reciprocal process by which personality and social processes influence each other. This view is consistent with the idea that personality can shape the interaction between individuals and their social environments (Buss, 1987). For example, personality has been shown to be associated with the characteristics individuals find attractive in potential mates (Botwin, Buss, & Shackelford, 1997; Buss, 1987). Mate selection and mate retention are important aspects of social interaction so it is not surprising that these important aspects of human life are connected to personality features.

Although the present study had a number of strengths (e.g., community sample, comprehensive model of personality), there are limitations. One limitation is that we employed a process model based on the idea that personality features influence the use of mate retention strategies. Although our data demonstrate the existence of associations between these personality dimensions and the use of mate retention strategies, directionality cannot be determined due to our reliance on correlational data. For example, it is possible that the direction of causality may be reversed such that the use of particular mate retention strategies may influence basic personality traits (e.g., prolonged use of intersexual negative inducements may change an individual's attitudes toward honesty–humility). It is also possible that a reciprocal relationship exists between personality features and the use of mate retention strategies or that both personality features and mate retention strategies may develop as a result of another factor such as life history (Figueredo et al., 2006). A second limitation is that we recruited participants using MTurk and they completed the questionnaires via a secure website. Research conducted via the internet lacks the same control offered in the laboratory (Buhrmester et al., 2011; Rand, 2012) so it is possible that our participants may have completed their questionnaires in noisy or otherwise distracting environments. It is also possible that our participants may have responded to the questionnaires in a hurried manner which may explain why the correlations among the HEXACO dimensions were somewhat stronger than what has been observed among participants completing the HEXACO-60 in more controlled

settings (e.g., Ashton & Lee, 2009). However, community samples offer greater diversity in age and relationship experiences than typical undergraduate samples. For example, 39% of our sample reported being married and 26% reported cohabitating but these groups would have been much less prevalent in an undergraduate sample. This diversity in relationship experience provides valuable information about the connection between personality features and mate retention strategies across a wide array of relationships. A third limitation is that the participants in our sample had been in their current relationships for longer periods than is typical for work in this area (i.e., the average length of relationship in our sample was approximately seven years). Although it is beneficial to extend the examination of mate retention strategies to more mature relationships, previous work has found the use of mate retention strategies decline in the three-year period immediately following marriage (Kaighobadi et al., 2010). As a result, our sample may have reported using fewer mate retention strategies than would have been observed if our participants had been in relationships of shorter duration. A fourth limitation is that we relied exclusively on self-report measures which prevent us from ruling out the possibility that our results were influenced by response distortions (e.g., socially desirable responding; Dillman, Smyth, & Christian, 2009). However, previous work has shown high levels of agreement between self- and observer-reports of the HEXACO (Ashton & Lee, 2009), and between self- and partner-reports of the MRI (Buss & Shackelford, 1997), which suggests that the present results are unlikely to simply be due to the response styles of the participants.

5. Conclusions

Our findings show that personality features are associated with the strategies that individuals employ to preserve and maintain their romantic relationships. That is, individuals with certain personality traits were more or less willing to engage in the use of particular mate retention strategies. For example, the honesty–humility dimension was negatively associated with the mate retention strategies of direct guarding, intersexual negative inducements, positive inducements, and intrasexual negative inducements. This suggests that individuals who scored higher on honesty–humility were less willing than other individuals to engage in mate retention behaviors that involved manipulating, deceiving, or exploiting their romantic partners.

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