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Why do men insult their intimate partners?

William F. McKibbin ^{a,*}, Aaron T. Goetz ^a, Todd K. Shackelford ^a,
Lucas D. Schipper ^a, Valerie G. Starratt ^a, Steve Stewart-Williams ^b

^a Florida Atlantic University, Department of Psychology, 2912 College Avenue, Davie, FL 33314, USA

^b Department of Psychology, Neuroscience, and Behaviour, McMaster University, 1280 Main Street West,
Hamilton, Ontario, Canada L8S 4K1

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Abstract

Men sometimes insult their intimate partners and these insults predict intimate partner violence. No research has investigated the *function* of men's partner-directed insults. We hypothesize that men's partner-directed insults are designed to retain their long-term mate and, therefore, that men's use of partner-directed insults will covary with other mate retention behaviors. Using the mate retention inventory and the partner-directed insults scale, we conducted two studies to test this hypothesis. Study 1 included 245 men who reported their mate retention behaviors and partner-directed insults. Correlations and multiple regression analyses documented the predicted relationships between men's partner-directed insults and mate retention behaviors. Study 2 included 372 women who reported their partner's mate retention behaviors and insults that their partner-directed at them. The results replicated the results of Study 1. Discussion highlights future directions for investigating the relationships between men's partner-directed insults and mate retention behaviors.

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Keywords: Verbal insults; Mate retention; Intimate partner violence; Violence against women

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +1 954 236 1179; fax: +1 954 236 1099.
E-mail address: wmckibbi@fau.edu (W.F. McKibbin).

1. Introduction

Violence inflicted by men against women plagues many intimate relationships. This violence may be physical or verbal in nature. Although much research has investigated men's physical abuse against their intimate partners (see [Arriaga & Oskamp, 1999](#), for a review), less research has investigated men's verbal abuse against their intimate partners, including partner-directed insults. Of particular interest in the current research is why verbal abuse occurs. For example, do men insult their partners to prevent their partner's defection from the relationship, as part of a broader strategy of "mate retention" ([Buss, 1988](#); [Buss & Shackelford, 1997](#))? Or, conversely, do men insult their partners to promote defection and subsequent termination of the relationship? No previous research has investigated these questions.

If insults are designed to retain a mate, then men's use of partner-directed insults should covary with other mate retention behaviors—i.e., behaviors that function to maintain and retain a romantic partner's exclusive involvement in the relationship. Much research on mate retention has used [Buss \(1988\)](#) mate retention inventory. Buss presented a taxonomy of mate retention behaviors that divided these behaviors into five categories: *Direct Guarding* includes physical acts intended to keep the man's partner under his surveillance (e.g., "He insisted that she spend all her free time with him."). *Intersexual Negative Inducements* includes acts intended to manipulate or threaten his partner into remaining faithful (e.g., "He became jealous when she went out without him."). *Intrasexual Negative Inducements* includes similar acts of manipulation or threat directed toward a man's potential rivals (e.g., "He yelled at the other guys who looked at her."). *Positive Inducements* includes acts such as sexual favors, gifts, or affection (e.g., "He went out of his way to be kind, nice, and caring."). Finally, *Public Signals of Possession* includes behaviors intended as signals of a man's "possession" of his partner (e.g., "He bragged about her to other guys."). The Direct Guarding, Intersexual Negative Inducements, and Intrasexual Negative Inducements categories subsume tactics that are negative or include inflicting costs on a partner. The Positive Inducements and Public Signals of Possession categories, in contrast, subsume tactics that are positive or include bestowing benefits on a partner.

Men's use of particular mate retention behaviors recently was documented to be related positively to their use of intimate partner violence ([Shackelford, Goetz, & Buss, 2005a](#)). For example, dropping by unexpectedly to check up on a partner appears to be a harbinger of partner-directed violence. Partner-directed violence therefore may be another mate retention tactic used by men. We hypothesize that partner-directed insults also may be deployed as part of a broader mate retention strategy. Research has documented a positive relationship between verbal abuse and partner-directed violence ([Gondolf, Heckert, & Kimmel, 2002](#); [Wilson, Johnson, & Daly, 1995](#)). A similar relationship was documented between partner-directed insults (a specific form of verbal abuse) and partner-directed violence ([Goetz, Shackelford, Schipper, & Stewart-Williams, 2006](#)). In the current research, we tested several predictions derived from the hypothesis that men insult their partners to retain them.

Using [Buss's \(1988\)](#) five categories of mate retention, we generated five predictions from the hypothesis that men's verbal insults are deployed as mate retention behaviors. Men's use of partner-directed insults will be related positively to their Direct Guarding (prediction 1), Intersexual Negative Inducements (prediction 2), and Intrasexual Negative Inducements (prediction 3). Because the Positive Inducements and Public Signals of Possession categories include acts intended

to evoke a partner's affection, we expect men's use of the acts in these categories to be related *negatively* to men's partner-directed insults. Thus, men's use of partner-directed insults will be related negatively to their Positive Inducements (prediction 4) and Public Signals of Possession (prediction 5). We conducted two studies to test these predictions. Study 1 secured men's self-reports on measures of partner-directed insults and mate retention behaviors. Study 2 secured in an independent sample women's partner-reports on these measures.

2. Study 1: Men's reports of their partner-directed insults and mate retention

We administered the partner-directed insult scale (PDIS; Goetz et al., 2006) and the mate retention inventory (MRI; Buss, 1988) to a sample of men to investigate whether and to what extent the components of the PDIS, as well as the total PDIS score, correlated with the categories of mate retention assessed by the MRI. We then used multiple regression to investigate the extent to which each insult component uniquely predicts men's self-reports of mate retention behaviors.

3. Methods

3.1. Participants

Two hundred forty-five male university students and community members participated in this study. Participants were at least 18 years old and in a committed heterosexual relationship. The mean age of the participants was 25.8 years ($SD = 10.0$). The mean length of their relationships was 43.1 months ($SD = 63.6$).

3.2. Materials

Each participant completed the PDIS (Goetz et al., 2006), and the MRI (Buss, 1988). The PDIS assesses the type and frequency of men's partner-directed insults. Participants indicate how many times in the past month they said each of 47 insults to their partner, on a scale ranging from 0 (*Never*) to 5 (*25 or more*). Participants are explicitly instructed to interpret the items as insulting things a man might say to his intimate partner and that are designed to be hurtful. Goetz et al. documented statistically that the insults comprise four relatively independent components. The first component, Derogating Physical Attractiveness, includes insults in which men derogate their partner's physical appearance (e.g., "I told my partner that she is ugly."). The second component, Derogating Value as Partner/Mental Capacity, includes insults in which men derogate the qualities that make one a good intimate relationship partner, as well as insults derogating a partner's mental abilities (e.g., "I told my partner that she makes my life miserable," and "I called my partner an idiot."). The third component, Derogating Value as a Person, includes insults derogating a partner's general worth as a person (e.g., "I told my partner that she will never amount to anything."). The fourth component, Accusations of Sexual Infidelity, includes insults related to a partner's sexual fidelity (e.g., "I accused my partner of having sex with another man."). Inter-correlations among scores on the four components range from .19 to .52, with an average correlation of .36.

Previous research has established the reliability, validity, and utility of the PDIS as an assessment of the content and frequency of the insults that men direct at their partners in intimate relationships (Goetz et al., 2006; Goetz, Starratt, Shackelford, McKibbin, & Stewart-Williams, under review).

The MRI assesses how often men performed each of 104 mate retention acts in the past month, ranging from 0 (*Never*) to 3 (*Often*). Previous research has established the reliability, validity, and utility of the MRI as an assessment of mate retention behaviors (e.g., Buss, 1988; Buss & Shackelford, 1997; Shackelford et al., 2005a). We argue for the continued use of Buss (1988) mate retention categories, which provides continuity with previous work (e.g., Buss, 1988; Buss & Shackelford, 1997) and, in the current research, organizes mate retention behaviors in a theoretically sensible way that allows for clear tests of the predictions.

3.3. Procedure

Upon arriving at the scheduled location, participants were handed a consent form and survey. The participants were instructed to read and sign the consent form, complete the survey, and then place the survey into an envelope, which they then sealed. Participants were asked to place the signed consent form in a separate envelope to maintain anonymity.

4. Results and discussion

The alpha reliabilities for the full-scale, total PDIS and the four components of the PDIS (Derogating Physical Attractiveness, Derogating Value as a Partner/Mental Capacity, Derogating Value as a Person, and Accusations of Sexual Infidelity), where $\alpha = .91, .91, .83, .74,$ and $.83$, respectively. The alpha reliabilities for the five categories of the MRI (Direct Guarding, Intersexual Negative Inducements, Public Signals of Possession, Intrasexual Negative Inducements, and Positive Inducements) where $\alpha = .88, .88, .79, .81,$ and $.86$, respectively.

To test the predictions, we calculated correlations between total PDIS scores with scores on each of the five MRI categories. As displayed in the top row of Table 1, the total PDIS scores correlated positively with three of the five categories of mate retention behavior: Direct Guarding, Intersexual Negative Inducements, and Intrasexual Negative Inducements. These results provide support for predictions 1, 2, and 3, respectively. PDIS scores correlated negatively but not significantly with the Positive Inducements and Public Signals of Possession categories of mate retention, failing to provide statistical support for predictions 4 and 5, respectively.

For reportorial completeness, we correlated scores on each of the five mate retention categories with scores on the four components of the PDIS (see the second through fifth rows of Table 1). The four PDIS component scores correlated significantly with the three negative mate retention categories (Direct Guarding, Intersexual Negative Inducements, and Intrasexual Negative Inducements), although not with the same strength and unanimity as the total PDIS score. Two PDIS components correlated significantly with a positive mate retention category: Derogating Physical Attractiveness and Derogating Value as a Person correlated negatively with performance of Positive Inducements.

We then conducted five multiple regression analyses to investigate the extent to which each PDIS component uniquely predicted performance of each of the five categories of the MRI. As displayed in Table 2, the models predicting Direct Guarding, Intersexual Negative Inducements, Intrasexual

Table 1

Study 1: Correlations between men’s self-reports of partner-directed insults (total and four components) and mate retention

Partner-directed insults	Mate retention categories				
	Intersexual direct guarding	Intrasexual negative inducements	Negative inducements	Positive inducements	Public signals of possession
Total	.36***	.30***	.27***	-.09	-.07
Derogating physical attractiveness	.18**	.13*	.12	-.17**	-.11
Derogating value as a partner/mental competency	.32***	.30***	.25***	.05	.00
Derogating value as a person	.28***	.23***	.21***	-.16*	-.10
Accusations of sexual infidelity	.36***	.29***	.35***	-.05	.00

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

Negative Inducements, and Positive Inducements were significant. Investigation of the individual standardized regression coefficients indicated that Derogating Value as a Partner/Mental Capacity uniquely predicted men’s mate retention for each of the categories that produced significant models. Accusations of Sexual Infidelity also uniquely predicted Direct Guarding, Intersexual Negative Inducements, and Intrasexual Negative Inducements. We then conducted parallel correlations and multiple regressions, controlling for participant age and relationship length. These statistical controls did not change the pattern of results (analyses available on request).

Table 2

Study 1: Multiple regression analyses for men’s self-reports of partner-directed insults predicting mate retention (reported in standardized beta weights)

Partner-directed insults	Mate retention categories					
	Direct guarding	Intersexual negative inducements	Intrasexual negative inducements	Positive inducements	Public signals of possession	
Derogating physical attractiveness	-.03	-.08	-.04	-.17	-.08	
Derogating value as a partner/mental competency	.23***	.24***	.18**	.14*	.05	
Derogating value as a person	.11	.12	.03	-.10	-.09	
Accusations of sexual infidelity	.25***	.18*	.29***	-.01	.04	
Full model	<i>F</i>	14.12***	9.83***	10.48***	3.20*	1.07
	<i>R</i> ²	.19	.14	.15	.05	.02

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

In summary, men's self-reports indicated that men who insult their partners are more likely to engage in certain types of mate retention: Direct Guarding, Intersexual Negative Inducements, and Intrasexual Negative Inducements. These findings support predictions 1, 2, and 3, respectively. Men who insult their partners may be less likely to engage in Positive Inducements and Public Signals of Possession. These findings were in the direction predicted by predictions 4 and 5, but did not reach statistical significance. Overall, the results suggest that men's partner-directed insults may be deployed as part of a broader strategy of mate retention.

5. Study 2: Women's reports of their partner's insults and mate retention

Men and women are sometimes discordant in reporting violence in their relationship. Some research suggests that women are relatively more accurate in these reports (Dobash, Dobash, Cavanagh, & Lewis, 1998; Magdol et al., 1997). It might be that men are less accurate in reporting their partner-directed insults than are women in reporting their partner's use of insults directed at them. For this reason, we administered partner-report versions of the PDIS and the MRI to a sample of women. We investigated whether and to what extent women's reports of their partner's insults correlated with their reports of their partner's mate retention behaviors. We then used multiple regression to investigate the extent to which performance on each insult component uniquely predicts women's reports of their partner's mate retention behaviors. Because the women that participated in this second study were not partnered to the men that participated in Study 1, this study provides independent tests of the hypothesis and five predictions tested in Study 1.

6. Methods

6.1. Participants

Three hundred seventy-two female university students and community members participated in this study. Participants were at least 18 years old and in a committed heterosexual relationship. The mean age of the participants was 25.5 years ($SD = 7.8$). The mean length of their relationships was 51.4 months ($SD = 62.8$).

6.2. Materials and procedure

The materials and procedure were identical to those used in Study 1, with the exception that women were asked to provide reports of their partner's mate retention behaviors and partner-directed insults.

7. Results and discussion

The alpha reliabilities for the full-scale, total PDIS and the four components of the PDIS (Derogating Physical Attractiveness, Derogating Value as a Partner/Mental Capacity, Derogating

Value as a Person, and Accusations of Sexual Infidelity), where $\alpha = .92, .85, .87, .82,$ and $.87,$ respectively. The alpha reliabilities for the five categories of the MRI (Direct Guarding, Intersexual Negative Inducements, Public Signals of Possession, Intrasexual Negative Inducements, and Positive Inducements) where $\alpha = .90, .89, .81, .72,$ and $.89,$ respectively.

To test the predictions, we calculated correlations between total PDIS scores with scores on each of the five MRI categories. As displayed in the top row of Table 3, total PDIS scores again correlated positively with scores on three of the five categories of mate retention behavior: Direct Guarding, Intersexual Negative Inducements, and Intrasexual Negative Inducements. These results provide support for predictions 1, 2, and 3, respectively. Total PDIS scores correlated negatively but not significantly with the Positive Inducements and Public Signals of Possession categories of mate retention, failing to provide statistical support for predictions 4 and 5, respectively.

For reportorial completeness, we correlated scores on each of the five mate retention categories with scores on the four components of the PDIS (see the second through fourth rows of Table 3). The four PDIS component scores again correlated significantly with the three negative mate retention categories (Direct Guarding, Intersexual Negative Inducements, and Intrasexual Negative Inducements), although not with the same strength and unanimity as the total PDIS score. None of the PDIS components correlated significantly with a positive mate retention category.

We then conducted five multiple regression analyses to investigate the extent to which each PDIS component uniquely predicted performance of each of the five categories of the MRI. As displayed in Table 4, the models predicting Direct Guarding, Intersexual Negative Inducements, Intrasexual Negative Inducements, and Public Signals of Possession were significant. Investigation of the individual standardized regression coefficients indicated that Derogating Physical Attractiveness and Accusations of Sexual Infidelity uniquely predicted men's mate retention for each of the three negative categories of mate retention. Derogating Value as a Partner/Mental

Table 3

Study 2: Correlations between women's partner-reports of partner-directed insults (total and four components) and mate retention

Partner-directed insults	Mate retention categories				
	Direct guarding	Intersexual negative inducements	Intrasexual negative inducements	Positive inducements	Public signals of possession
Total	.41 ^{***}	.45 ^{***}	.29 ^{***}	-.04	-.03
Derogating physical attractiveness	.41 ^{***}	.41 ^{***}	.28 ^{***}	.04	.05
Derogating value as a partner/mental competency	.28 ^{***}	.31 ^{***}	.22 ^{***}	-.10	-.10
Derogating value as a person	.27 ^{***}	.27 ^{***}	.17 ^{***}	-.08 [*]	.04
Accusations of sexual infidelity	.29 ^{***}	.43 ^{***}	.20 ^{***}	-.03	-.03

* $p < .05.$

** $p < .01.$

*** $p < .001.$

Table 4

Study 2: Multiple regression analyses for women's partner-reports of partner-directed insults predicting mate retention (reported in standardized beta weights)

Partner-directed insults	Mate retention categories					
	Direct guarding	Intersexual negative inducements	Intraseexual negative inducements	Positive inducements	Public signals of possession	
Derogating physical attractiveness	.34***	.31***	.24***	.13	.11	
Derogating value as a partner/mental competency	.02	.03	.07	-.19**	-.23***	
Derogating value as a person	.01	-.02	-.04	.03	.12	
Accusations of sexual infidelity	.19***	.34***	.12*	-.01	-.02	
Full model	<i>F</i>	23.29***	35.63***	10.22***	2.23	3.27*
	<i>R</i> ²	.20	.28	.10	.02	.03

* $p < .05$.

** $p < .01$.

*** $p < .001$.

Capacity uniquely predicted men's mate retention for both of the positive categories of mate retention. We then conducted parallel correlations and multiple regressions, controlling for participant age and relationship length. As in Study 1, these statistical controls did not change the pattern of results (analyses available on request).

In summary, women's partner-reports generated results paralleling those of Study 1. Men who insult their partners are more likely to engage in certain types of mate retention: Direct Guarding, Intersexual Negative Inducements, and Intraseexual Negative Inducements. These findings support predictions 1, 2, and 3, respectively. Men who insult their partners may be less likely to engage in Positive Inducements and Public Signals of Possession. These findings were in the direction predicted by predictions 4 and 5, but did not reach statistical significance. Overall, and consistent with the results of Study 1, the results of Study 2 suggest that men's partner-directed insults may be deployed as part of a broader strategy of mate retention.

7.1. Comparing the results for men's self-reports (Study 1) and women's partner-reports (Study 2)

Comparing the correlations obtained from men's self-reports (Study 1) to those obtained from women's partner-reports (Study 2) indicates that men and women tended to report similar relationships between partner-directed insults and mate retention behaviors. Fisher's r -to- z transformations revealed that the correlations were significantly sex-differentiated for just one component of insults: Derogating Physical Attractiveness. Relative to men's self-reports, women's partner-reports generated stronger correlations between this component and three categories of mate retention: Direct Guarding, Intersexual Negative Inducements, and Positive Inducements (analyses available on request).

Both studies generated support for predictions 1, 2, and 3, but not for predictions 4 and 5 (although the relationships were in the predicted direction). Regression analyses in Study 1 revealed that two insult components uniquely predicted performance of behaviors in the negative mate retention categories: Derogating Value as a Partner/Mental Capacity and Accusations of Sexual Infidelity. However, regression analyses in Study 2 revealed that Derogating Value as a Partner/Mental Capacity did not uniquely predict performance of behaviors in any mate retention category. The two uniquely predictive insult components in Study 2 were Derogating Physical Attractiveness and Accusations of Sexual Infidelity. Across both studies, therefore, insults included within the component Accusations of Sexual Infidelity uniquely predicted men's mate retention behaviors.

8. General discussion

We hypothesized that partner-directed insults may be deployed by men along with other tactics to maintain an intimate partner's exclusive involvement in the relationship. Specifically, we predicted that the use of partner-directed insults would be correlated positively with the performance of behaviors included within the three negative categories of mate retention identified by Buss (1988): Direct Guarding, Intersexual Negative Inducements, and Intrasexual Negative Inducements. The results generated by two independent studies of men's self-reports and women's partner-reports provided support for these predictions. We also predicted that deployment of partner-directed insults would be correlated negatively with performance of behaviors included in the two positive mate retention categories identified by Buss: Public Signals of Possession and Positive Inducements. Across both studies, the correlations were in the predicted direction, but none was statistically significant.

The partner-directed insults that consistently predicted men's mate retention across both studies were the insults included in component Accusations of Sexual Infidelity. This insult component was a unique predictor of men's mate retention according to both men's self-reports and women's partner-reports. Men who accuse their partners of sexual infidelity also perform more negative mate retention behaviors. These results corroborate previous research indicating that men that are especially concerned about a partner's sexual fidelity are particularly likely to engage in negative mate retention behaviors and other cost-inflicting retention tactics, including violence and sexual coercion (Shackelford, Goetz, Buss, Euler, & Hoier, 2005b; Goetz & Shackelford, 2006).

Two other components of the PDIS also are important predictors of men's mate retention. According to men's self-reports, the use of insults included in the component Derogating Value as a Partner/Mental Capacity strongly predicts men's mate retention behaviors. This component includes insults in which men derogate the qualities that make one a good partner, along with insults derogating a partner's mental abilities (e.g., "I told my partner that she makes me unhappy;" "I called my partner an idiot"). Derogating a partner's value may cause her to feel that she cannot secure a better relationship partner, or that no one else would want her as a partner, with the result that she is less likely to defect from the relationship. According to women's partner-reports, the use of insults included in component Derogating Physical Attractiveness strongly predicts men's mate retention behaviors. Derogating Physical Attractiveness also may function to cause

a woman to feel that she cannot secure a better partner, with the result that she is less likely to defect from the relationship.

The current studies have several limitations. Previous research indicates that cross-partner-reports on the MRI are correlated positively (Shackelford et al., 2005b), suggesting that men and women can accurately report their own and their partner's mate retention behaviors. The cross-partner agreement for the PDIS, however, has not been investigated. If the use of partner-directed insults represents mate retention efforts, we might expect cross-partner-reports for the PDIS to be correlated positively, as was found for the MRI. Future research could profitably test this hypothesis. The current results also suggest a number of other future studies.

The present research focused squarely on men's mate retention and partner-directed insults. Women also are likely to use partner-directed insults. It may be interesting to investigate whether women use partner-directed insults as a mate retention tactic, or if the deployment of partner-directed insults by women serves a different purpose. No previous research has investigated the function of women's use of partner-directed insults. This may be a fruitful line of future research.

Not all men are expected to use partner-directed insults. Future research might identify the characteristics or qualities of men who insult their partners and the characteristics and qualities of men who do not. For example, the relationship between men's mate retention behaviors and partner-directed insults may reflect individual differences in personality characteristics such as aggressivity. Also, variables such as relative mate value and other relationship factors may affect the deployment and utility of partner-directed insults.

An important issue concerns how partner-directed insults might function to retain a partner. Results of the current research indicate that the use of partner-directed insults covaries with negative mate retention behaviors. Men's use of these particular insults may lead a woman to feel that she can do no better than her current relationship, or that she is incapable of finding another partner. Or it may be that men's use of partner-directed insults serve other or additional functions, such as driving away a partner with whom a man is no longer satisfied. Future research might investigate whether and to what degree the use of some partner-directed insults function as mate retention tactics, mate expulsion tactics, or perhaps both over time or for different individuals.

In summary, no prior research has investigated why men insult their partners. We hypothesized that men insult their partners as part of a broader strategy of mate retention. The results provide some support for this hypothesis. Men's partner-directed insults may be part of a mate retention strategy, functioning to prevent or thwart a woman's defection from the relationship.

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