



## Short Communication

## Oral sex as mate retention behavior

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## ABSTRACT

Men perform “mate retention” behaviors to reduce the likelihood of their partner’s infidelity. One mate retention strategy men use is to increase their partner’s relationship satisfaction by provisioning her with benefits. We recruited 351 men to investigate whether men perform oral sex on their partner as part of a broader benefit-provisioning mate retention strategy. In support of the predictions, men who reported performing more mate retention behaviors, in general, and more benefit-provisioning mate retention behaviors, in particular, also reported greater interest in and spent more time performing oral sex on their partner. We present limitations of the research and discuss the benefits of an evolutionary perspective for investigating oral sex as a mate retention behavior.

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## 1. Introduction

Female infidelity has been documented in dozens of cultures worldwide, and some published samples estimate that as many as 70% of women have committed infidelity at least once in their lifetime (Allen & Baucom, 2006; Buss, 1994; Schmitt, 2003; Wiederman & Hurd, 1999). Men who suspect or discover their partner’s infidelity may suffer from physical and psychological problems, including major depression, anxiety, and relationship dissatisfaction (Cano & O’Leary, 2000; Betzig, 1989).

Men perform “mate retention” behaviors to reduce the likelihood of their partner’s infidelity. Buss (1988) identified 19 mate retention “tactics” that range from subtle to overt (see Table 1). Buss organized these tactics into five “categories”: Direct Guarding, Intersexual Negative Inducements, Intrasexual Negative Inducements, Positive Inducements, and Public Signals of Possession. Direct Guarding includes behaviors such as vigilance about one’s partner’s whereabouts and concealment of one’s partner (e.g., “I called at unexpected times to see who my partner was with”). Intersexual Negative Inducements include behaviors that manipulate and derogate one’s partner (e.g., “I threatened to harm myself if my partner ever left me”). Intrasexual Negative Inducements include behaviors intended to deter same-sex rivals from pursuing one’s partner (e.g., “I told others my partner was a pain”). Positive Inducements include behaviors that increase the appeal of the current relationship to one’s partner (e.g., “I bought my partner an expensive gift”). Public Signals of Possession include behaviors that

display to others that one’s relationship is exclusive and committed (e.g., “I held my partner’s hand when others of my same sex were around”).

Miner, Starratt, and Shackelford (2009) organized the five categories into two superordinate “domains”: cost-inflicting mate retention behaviors and benefit-provisioning mate retention behaviors. Direct Guarding, Intersexual Negative Inducements, and Intrasexual Negative Inducements comprise the cost-inflicting domain. Behaviors in this domain reduce the risk of partner infidelity by lowering one’s partner’s self-esteem, thereby causing her to feel undeserving of her current partner but especially of any other partner (Miner et al., 2009). In contrast, Positive Inducements and Public Signals of Possession comprise the benefit-provisioning domain. Behaviors in this domain reduce the risk of partner infidelity by increasing one’s partner’s relationship satisfaction (Miner et al., 2009).

## 1.1. Oral sex and mate retention

Men may perform oral sex on their partner as a means of mate retention. Men at greater risk of partner infidelity report greater interest in and spend more time performing oral sex on their partner (Pham & Shackelford, 2013). In contrast, men do not typically perform oral sex on a woman during a casual, sexual encounter (i.e. “a one night stand”; Armstrong, England, Fogarty, & Risman, 2009; Backstrom, Armstrong, & Puentes, 2012; Lewis, Granato, Blayney, Lostutter, & Kilmer, 2012; Reiber & Garcia, 2010), a mating context that presents no risk of long-term partner infidelity. We hypothesize that men perform oral sex on their partner as a mate retention behavior. Specifically, we predict that men who

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**Table 1**  
Correlations between the two target oral sex variables and the 19 mate retention tactics.

Mate retention tactics	Oral sex variables		Mate retention tactics	Oral sex variables	
	Interest in performing oral sex	Duration of oral sex		Interest in performing oral sex	Duration of oral sex
Vigilance	.00	.00	Violence	.05	.10
Concealment of Mate	-.02	.04	Intrasexual Threats	.11*	.11*
Monopolize Mate's Time	.03	-.02	Verbal Signals of Possession	.24**	.14**
Enhance Physical Appearance	.08	.11*	Physical Signals of Possession	.22**	.12*
Punish Mate's Threat to Infidelity	-.01	.08	Possessive Ornamentation	.18**	.10
Emotional Manipulation	.08	.03	Derogation of Competitors	.10	.05
Commitment Manipulation	.12*	.15**	Submission and Debasement	.10	.08
Derogation of Mate to Competitors	-.04	-.02	Expressions of Love and Caring	.20**	.08
Resource Display	.11*	.14**	Threaten Infidelity	-.10	.00
Sexual Inducements	.12*	.12*			

*n* = 351 men.

\* *p* < .05.

\*\* *p* < .01.

report performing more mate retention behaviors, in general, will report greater interest in (Prediction 1) and spend more time performing (Prediction 2) oral sex on their partner.

Oral sex may be a *benefit-provisioning* mate retention behavior. Miner et al. (2009) documented that men at greater risk of partner infidelity performed more benefit-provisioning mate retention behaviors, but *not* more cost-inflicting mate retention behaviors. Women who receive oral sex from their partner, relative to those who do not, report greater relationship satisfaction (Kaestle & Halpern, 2007; Santtila et al., 2008). Because greater partner relationship satisfaction is an outcome of benefit-provisioning mate retention, we hypothesize that men perform oral sex on their partner as part of a benefit-provisioning mate retention strategy. Specifically, we predict that men who report performing more benefit-provisioning mate retention behaviors, but *not* more cost-inflicting mate retention behaviors, will report greater interest in (Prediction 3) and spend more time performing (Prediction 4) oral sex on their partner.

## 2. Methods

### 2.1. Participants

Three hundred and fifty-one men in a committed, sexual, heterosexual relationship participated in exchange for extra credit in a course. The mean participant age was 24.2 years (*SD* = 7.2) and the mean relationship length was 36.3 months (*SD* = 51.6).

### 2.2. Materials

Participants reported their age and current relationship length on a questionnaire. Participants completed the Mate Retention Inventory, which assesses performance of 104 mate retention behaviors (see Buss, 1988). On a scale from 0–3, participants reported how frequently they performed each behavior within the past month (0 = *never performed this act*, 1 = *rarely performed this act*, 2 = *sometimes performed this act*, 3 = *often performed this act*).

Participants answered questions about their most recent sexual encounter with their partner on a 0–9 scale: own interest in performing oral sex (0 = *less interested or excited than is typical for me*, 9 = *more interested or excited than is typical for me*), and duration of oral sex (0 = *less time than is typical for me*, 9 = *more time than is typical for me*).

### 2.3. Procedures

Potential male participants were asked if they were at least 18 years of age and in a committed, sexual, heterosexual relationship. Those who qualified were asked to sign a consent form and to complete a questionnaire. Participants were asked to place the completed questionnaire in an envelope that they then sealed, and to place the consent form in a separate envelope, to retain anonymity.

## 3. Results

Following Buss (1988), we constructed 19 mate retention tactic variables from scores on the Mate Retention Inventory. We correlated scores for each mate retention tactic with scores on the two oral sex variables (see Table 1). Men who reported greater interest in performing oral sex on their partner also reported greater use of Intrasexual Threats, Resource Display, Sexual Inducements, Commitment Manipulation, Verbal Signals of Possession, Physical Signals of Possession, Possessive Ornamentation, and Expressions of Love and Care. Men who reported spending more time performing oral sex on their partner also reported greater use of Intrasexual Threats, Enhance Physical Appearance, Commitment Manipulation, Resource Display, Sexual Inducements, Verbal Signals of Possession, and Physical Signals of Possession.

We constructed an *overall mate retention* variable from the sum of responses to all 104 items of the Mate Retention Inventory ( $\alpha = .96$ ). Consistent with Predictions 1 and 2, men who reported performing more mate retention behaviors, in general, also reported greater interest in and spent more time performing oral sex on their partner (see Table 2).

Following Buss (1988), we organized the 19 tactics into five categories: Direct Guarding ( $\alpha = .84$ ), Intersexual Negative Inducements ( $\alpha = .79$ ), Intrasexual Negative Inducements ( $\alpha = .87$ ), Positive Inducements ( $\alpha = .89$ ), and Public Signals of Possession ( $\alpha = .81$ ). We correlated scores on each of the five categories with scores on the two oral sex variables. Men who reported performing more Positive Inducements and Public Signals of Possession also reported greater interest in and spent more time performing oral sex on their partner (see Table 2).

Following Miner et al. (2009), we constructed a *benefit-provisioning mate retention* variable from the sum of responses to the items in the Positive Inducements and Public Signals of Possession categories ( $\alpha = .92$ ). Also following Miner et al., we constructed a *cost-inflicting mate retention* variable from the sum of responses

**Table 2**

Correlations between scores on the two target oral sex variables with scores on five mate retention categories, two mate retention domains, and overall mate retention behaviors.

	Oral sex variables	
	Interest in performing oral sex	Duration of oral sex
<i>Mate retention categories</i>		
Direct Guarding	.01	.00
Intersexual Negative Inducements	.05	.07
Intrasexual Negative Inducements	.06	.09
Positive Inducements	.16**	.14**
Public Signals of Possession	.26**	.15**
<i>Mate retention domains</i>		
Benefit-provisioning	.23**	.16**
Cost-inflicting	.04	.05
Overall mate retention behaviors	.13*	.11*

$n = 351$  men.

\*  $p < .05$ .

\*\*  $p < .01$ .

**Table 3**

Multiple regression analyses assessing relationships between the two mate retention domains (benefit-provisioning and cost-inflicting) and the two oral sex variables.

Outcome variable	Mate retention domains			
	Benefit-provisioning		Cost-inflicting	
	<i>B</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>t</i>
Interest in performing oral sex	.12	4.85***	-.04	-2.25*
Duration of oral sex	.08	2.93**	-.02	-.94

$n = 351$  men.

*B* = unstandardized beta coefficient, *t* = test statistic associated with *B*.

\*  $p < .05$ .

\*\*  $p < .01$ .

\*\*\*  $p < .001$ .

to the items in the Direct Guarding, Intersexual Negative Inducements, and Intrasexual Negative Inducements categories ( $\alpha = .92$ ). We correlated scores on these two mate retention domains with responses on the two oral sex variables. Consistent with Predictions 3 and 4, men who reported performing more benefit-provisioning mate retention behaviors, but *not* more cost-inflicting mate retention behaviors, also reported greater interest in and spent more time performing oral sex on their partner (see Table 2).

Finally, we entered the *benefit-provisioning mate retention* and *cost-inflicting mate retention* variables into multiple regression equations to identify the unique effect each mate retention domain has on each of the two oral sex variables. Consistent with Predictions 3 and 4, men who reported performing more benefit-provisioning mate retention behaviors, but *not* more cost-inflicting mate retention behaviors, also reported greater interest in and spent more time performing oral sex on their partner. In fact, men who reported performing more cost-inflicting mate retention behaviors reported *less* interest in performing oral sex on their partner (see Table 3).

#### 4. Discussion

The results are consistent with the hypothesis that men perform oral sex on their partner as part of a broader benefit-provisioning mate retention strategy. Men who report performing more mate retention behaviors, in general, and more benefit-provisioning mate retention behaviors, in particular, report greater

interest in and spend more time performing oral sex on their partner.

The multiple regression analyses indicate that men who perform more cost-inflicting mate retention behaviors report *less* interest in performing oral sex on their partner. Although we did not predict this relationship, this result is consistent with previous research documenting that the frequency with which men perform benefit-provisioning behaviors is correlated *negatively* with their cost-inflicting behaviors (Miner et al., 2009). Men who provision their partner with benefits must expend resources (e.g., “I bought my partner an expensive gift”). In contrast, men who inflict costs on their partner expend fewer resources, but the costs men inflict on their partner may lower her relationship satisfaction and cause her to terminate the relationship. Therefore, men who have the resources to provision their partner with benefits also tend to avoid the risks associated with inflicting costs on her.

A limitation of the current study is the use of men's self-reports of their mate retention behaviors. Men may underreport the frequency with which they perform socially undesirable behaviors (e.g., “I told others of my same sex that my partner might have a sexually transmitted disease”). However, Shackelford, Goetz, and Buss (2005) documented that both men's and women's self-reports of their mate retention behaviors are positively correlated with their partner's reports of these behaviors. Nevertheless, future research may benefit from securing data from both men's self-reports and their partner's reports of men's mate retention behaviors.

The results of the current study might be explicable, in part, as a consequence of men's personality traits. Men who are more altruistic and agreeable, for example, might be more likely to provision their partner with benefits, including sexually pleasuring their partner by performing oral sex. Future research may test this explanation by assessing and statistically controlling for standings on personality traits that predict altruism and other individual difference correlates of partner-directed benefit-provisioning behaviors.

The Mate Retention Inventory (Buss, 1988) assesses the frequency with which men perform various mate retention behaviors *within the past month*. We asked about men's oral sex behaviors during their *most recent copulation* to ensure that they best remembered the details of, and therefore reported most accurately, their oral sex behaviors. Future research investigating the relationship between men's mate retention behaviors and their oral sex behaviors may consider securing men's reports of their oral sex behaviors across multiple copulations *within the past month*, to ensure that measures of mate retention and oral sex assess behaviors that occur during the same time span.

An evolutionary perspective provides a useful framework for researching infidelity. For example, men are more upset than woman about their partner's sexual infidelity (Buss, Larsen, Westen, & Semmelroth, 1992; Shackelford & Goetz, 2012). Women but not men who commit sexual infidelity impose reproductive costs on their partner in the form of cuckoldry—the unwitting investment of time and resources into offspring to whom their partner is genetically unrelated. Future research investigating the function of oral sex as a mate retention behavior would profit from adopting an evolutionary perspective by assessing sex differences in oral sex behaviors as a consequence of perceived risk of partner sexual infidelity.

In conclusion, men perform a diverse array of behaviors designed to minimize the risk of their partner's infidelity. Men may appease, threaten, conceal, or emotionally manipulate their partner to dissuade her from committing infidelity (Buss, 1988). The current research provides preliminary support for the hypothesis that oral sex is part of a broader benefit-provisioning male mate retention strategy.

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