



He said, she said: Men's reports of mate value and mate retention behaviors in intimate relationships

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ABSTRACT

Previous research indicates that men may have evolved psychological mechanisms that motivate behaviors designed to retain a long-term partner. Some of these behaviors function by inflicting (or threatening to inflict) costs on a partner who might be tempted to be unfaithful or to terminate the relationship, whereas others function by bestowing benefits on a partner to encourage her fidelity and commitment. Previous research indicates that men of higher mate value are more likely than men of lower mate value to engage in benefit-provisioning mate retention behaviors, whereas lower mate value men are more likely than higher mate value men to engage in cost-inflicting mate retention behaviors. Existing evidence, however, rests on women's self-reports of their own and their partner's mate value as well as their partner's mate retention behaviors. The current study investigates the extent to which the relationships between mate value and mate retention exist when men report on their own and their partner's mate value and their own retention behaviors. Results suggest that men's reports are sensitive to the relationship between women's mate value and men's mate retention, but not men's mate value and men's mate retention.

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1. Introduction

1.1. Mate retention

Cuckoldry, or unwitting investment in genetically unrelated offspring, is evolutionarily detrimental for men. Such an occurrence means that a man is investing his resources into ensuring the replication of a rival male's genes, instead of his own. Consequently, men may have evolved psychological mechanisms that motivate mate retention behaviors that function to reduce the risk of cuckoldry. These mate retention behaviors function to keep their partners invested in the relationship, thus reducing the risk of her extra-pair sexual behavior and attendant risk of cuckoldry (see Buss, 2003, for review; also Buss, 1988; Miner, Shackelford, & Starratt, 2009; Miner, Starratt, & Shackelford, 2009).

Two main classes of mate retention behaviors have been proposed: those that are benefit-provisioning and those that are cost-inflicting (Miner, Shackelford, et al., 2009; Miner, Starratt, et al., 2009). Benefit-provisioning mate retention behaviors function by enticing a woman to stay invested in the current relationship.

They include such behaviors as complimenting her appearance or giving her gifts. These behaviors, however, may not be available to all men. Providing material benefits requires access to material resources and providing social and emotional benefits requires psychological resources, both of which may only be reliably available to higher mate value men. Men of lower mate value may resort to the use of cost-inflicting mate retention behaviors, such as those that rely on manipulation, intimidation, and possessiveness. Like benefit-provisioning behaviors, these cost-inflicting behaviors are also costly to men, to the extent that they may result in retaliation by his partner's family, social stigmatization, etc. However, these costs are unpredictable, and occur consequentially, rather than as an initial investment. If a man does not have the resources required for the initial investment costs necessary for benefit-provisioning mate retention behaviors, he may be forced to risk the consequences of the cost-inflicting behaviors. Previous research supports these predictions, indicating that higher mate value men are more likely to use benefit-provisioning mate retention behaviors whereas lower mate value men are more likely to use cost-inflicting mate retention behaviors (Miner, Shackelford, et al., 2009; Miner, Starratt, et al., 2009).

1.2. Women's reports vs. men's reports

Previous research that documents a relationship between men's and women's mate value and men's use of mate retention

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behaviors relies exclusively on women's reports of their own and their partner's mate value and women's reports of their partner's mate retention behaviors. Because men's use of mate retention behaviors may be predictably costly to women, the relationship between costly mate retention behaviors and men's mate value may be particularly salient for women. Although these behaviors may also be associated with costs for the men who use them, those costs are substantially less predictable. In other words, the costs incurred by women as a result of men's cost-inflicting mate retention behaviors are certain, but the costs incurred by the men who engage in those behaviors are not. At the extreme, a man may suffer retaliatory injury or death as a result. Should his behaviors go unnoted, though, that man may suffer no negative effects.

We hypothesize, therefore, that the relationship between men's reports of mate value and men's mate retention behaviors will only be demonstrated for those behaviors which are predictably costly to men, such as those that require a costly material, social, or emotional up-front investment. However, as we would not expect even the highest value man to outlay these costs for a woman whom he would not deem worthy, we hypothesize that men will report these behaviors to be related to their partner's mate value, rather than their own. Specifically, we predict that:

- 1a. Men's reports of their own mate value and their partner's mate value will be unrelated to men's reports of their use of cost-inflicting mate retention behaviors.
- 1b. Men's reports of their own mate value or their partner's mate value will be unrelated to men's reports of their use of partner-directed insults, a specific category of cost-inflicting mate retention behaviors.
2. Men's reports of their partner's mate value, rather than their own mate value, will predict men's reports of their use of benefit-provisioning mate retention behaviors.

2. Methods

2.1. Participants

Two hundred thirty-seven men, each of whom reported that he was currently in a committed, sexual relationship with a woman participated in this study. The mean age of the participants was 22.4 years ($SD = 5.8$), the mean age of the participants' partners was 21.7 years ($SD = 5.2$), and the mean relationship length was 2.1 years ($SD = 2.9$). Participants were drawn from universities and surrounding metropolitan communities. Due to the sensitive nature of the questions and to assure anonymity, no further demographic information was collected.

2.2. Materials

Participants completed an online demographic questionnaire that solicited information on participant age, partner age, and the duration of the current relationship. After completing the demographic questions, participants completed two versions of the Trait-Specific Dependence Inventory (TSDI), one to assess their own mate value and one to assess their partner's mate value (Ellis, Simpson, & Campbell, 2002). The TSDI secures comparisons between one's current partner and alternative opposite-sex others along several factors of mate value (e.g., physical attractiveness, generosity, ambitiousness). The 34 items are formatted to reflect either assessments of one's partner's mate value (e.g., "If you and your current partner broke up, how difficult would it be for you to find another partner who is as physically strong?") or of one's own mate value (e.g., "If you and your current partner broke up, how difficult would it be for her to find another partner who is as physically strong as you?"). For each item, the participant indi-

cates how difficult it would be for him and his partner to replace each other, ranging from 1 = *Not difficult at all* to 5 = *Extremely difficult*. Previous research has established the reliability and validity of the TSDI (Ellis et al., 2002).

Participants also completed the Mate Retention Inventory – Short Form (MRI-SF; Buss, Shackelford, & McKibbin, 2008), which assesses performance of men's mate retention behaviors. The 38-item inventory assesses mate retention along the same 19 tactics as the original MRI (Buss, 1988). Previous research organized the 19 tactics from the original MRI into five categories (Buss, 1988; Shackelford, Goetz, & Buss, 2005). The current research organized the same 19 tactics from the MRI-SF into those same five categories: Direct Guarding (e.g., "Did not take my partner to a party where other men would be present"), Intersexual Negative Inducements (e.g., "Pointed out to my partner the flaws of another man"), Intrasexual Negative Inducements (e.g., "Told other men that my partner was not a nice person"), Positive Inducements (e.g., "Bought my partner an expensive gift"), and Public Signals of Possession (e.g., "Put my arm around my partner in front of others"). For each item, the participant indicates how often he has performed the behavior in the past year, ranging from 0 = *Never* to 3 = *Often*. For the current research (and following Miner, Shackelford, et al., 2009; Miner, Starratt, et al., 2009), the five mate retention categories were further organized into groups of benefit-provisioning behaviors (Positive Inducements and Public Signals of Possession) and cost-inflicting behaviors (Direct Guarding, Intersexual Negative Inducements, and Intrasexual Negative Inducements). Previous research has established the reliability and the validity of the MRI-SF (Buss et al., 2008).

Participants also completed the Partner-Directed Insults Scale (PDIS; Goetz, Shackelford, Schipper, & Stewart-Williams, 2006). Participants first read the following statements: "Men sometimes try to hurt their female partner's feelings by saying insulting things to them. The following list includes insulting things that a man might say to his partner." Participants were then presented with a list of 50 potentially insulting behaviors. For each item, the participant indicated how often he has said each insulting thing to his partner, ranging from 0 = *I have never said this insulting thing to my partner* to 5 = *I have said this insulting thing to my partner 25 or more times*. Following Goetz et al. (2006), we organized the 50 potentially insulting behaviors into four categories: Derogating Physical Attractiveness (e.g., "I told my partner that her breasts are ugly"), Derogating Value as a Partner/Mental Competency (e.g., "I told my partner that it is her fault when something bad happens"), Derogating Value as a Person (e.g., "I told my partner that she is worthless"), and Accusations of Sexual Infidelity (e.g., "I accused my partner of wanting to have sex with another man"). Previous research has established the reliability and validity of the PDIS (Goetz et al., 2006; McKibbin et al., 2007; Starratt, Goetz, Shackelford, McKibbin, & Stewart-Williams, 2008).

2.3. Procedures

Prospective participants were directed to a website with a link to an online survey and were required to answer three screening questions prior to participation. Participants had to be (1) male, (2) at least 18 years of age, and (3) currently in a committed, sexual relationship with a woman. If participants answered "yes" to all three questions and consented to participate, they proceeded to the online survey.

3. Results

Response values for the 34 items of the relevant version of the TSDI were summed to calculate scores for men's own mate value

Table 1

Multiple regression analyses for men's self-reports of men's and women's mate value predicting men's partner directed insults.

| Men's partner directed insults | Mate value (Standardized beta) | | Full model | | |
|---|--------------------------------|------|------------|--------------------------------------|----------------|
| | Women | Men | F | (df _B , df _w) | R ² |
| Derogating physical attractiveness | .03 | .07 | 0.51 | (2, 133) | .01 |
| Derogating value as a partner/ mental competency | -.03 | -.18 | 2.61 | (2, 128) | .02 |
| Derogating value as a person | -.04 | .19 | 1.95 | (2, 137) | .01 |
| Accusations of sexual infidelity | -.00 | -.08 | 0.47 | (2, 136) | .01 |
| Total | -.02 | -.12 | 1.06 | (2, 124) | .00 |

All $\alpha > .05$.

and for their partner's mate value (both $\alpha s = .95$). Men's perceptions of their own and their partner's mate value correlated positively ($r = .58, p < .001$), indicating that men perceive themselves to be of a similar mate value as their partners. This finding is consistent with research indicating that partners in long-term relationships tend to be of similar mate value (see Buss, 2003).

Response values for the 50 items of the PDIS were summed to calculate full-scale scores. Scores for each of the four categories of the PDIS were calculated by summing response values to items within that category, following Goetz et al. (2006). The alpha reliabilities for the full-scale, total PDIS and the four categories of the PDIS (Derogating Physical Attractiveness, Derogating Value as a Partner/Mental Capacity, Derogating Value as a Person, and Accusations of Sexual Infidelity), were $\alpha = .99, .94, .92, .93$, and $.87$, respectively.

Scores for each of the five categories of the MRI-SF were calculated by summing responses to items within that category, following Buss et al. (2008). Alpha reliabilities for the five categories – Direct Guarding, Intersexual Negative Inducements, Positive Inducements, Public Signals of Possession, and Intrasexual Negative Inducements – were $.80, .80, .75$, and $.67$, respectively. Scores for the benefit-provisioning behaviors and the cost-inflicting behaviors were calculated by summing the category values for the constituent mate retention categories (see Section 2.2). Alpha reliabilities benefit-provisioning mate retention behaviors and cost-inflicting mate retention behaviors were $.76$ and $.89$, respectively.

We first conducted multiple regression analyses to investigate whether men's reports of their own and their partner's mate value predicted men's use of partner-directed insults (see Table 1). Supporting prediction 1b, investigation of the standardized regression coefficients indicates that neither men's mate value nor women's mate value predicted men's use of partner-directed insults. Additionally, none of the overall models was significant.

We then conducted multiple regression analyses to investigate whether men's reports of their own and their partner's mate value

predicted men's use of mate retention behaviors in a pattern similar to that produced by women's reports (see Table 2). Supporting prediction 1a, investigation of the standardized regression coefficients indicates that men's mate value does not predict men's use of any mate retention behaviors. Supporting prediction 2, women's mate value predicts men's use of benefit-provisioning mate retention behaviors, but not cost-inflicting mate retention behaviors, although at the categorical level women's mate value predicts men's use of Intersexual Negative Inducements. The overall model was significant for this category as well. The full models were also significant for overall benefit-provisioning mate retention, as well as the individual categories of Positive Inducements and Public Signals of Possession.

4. Discussion

Previous research suggests that, according to women's reports, men's use of mate retention behaviors is predicted by men's mate value (Miner, Shackelford, et al., 2009; Miner, Starratt, et al., 2009). Specifically, men who are of higher mate value are more likely to use mate retention behaviors that function by enticing a woman to stay invested in the current relationship, whereas men who are of lower mate value are more likely to engage in behaviors that function by inflicting or threatening to inflict costs on a woman for not remaining invested in the current relationship.

Results of the current study suggest that men's reports do not demonstrate this relationship between men's mate value and men's mate retention behaviors. According to men's self-reports, men's mate value does not predict men's use of cost-inflicting mate retention behaviors. We interpret this to be a reflection of the difference in the costs that occur as a result of these behaviors. Women are sensitive to the relationship between mate value and mate retention behaviors because the costs to them are predictable and reliably detrimental. For example, a woman who is subjected to her partner's mate guarding behavior of isolating her from opportunities where she could meet other people has the predictably reliable result of preventing her from meeting other people. The consequences to him of perpetrating that behavior, on the other hand, are not as certain. If the behavior functions as intended and his partner remains invested in the relationship, and no one else becomes aware of his behavior, the costs to him are null. If the behavior does not function as intended, and/or others become aware of his behavior, the resulting costs could be great, ranging from social stigma to loss of mating opportunities to, in extreme cases, death from retaliation. Thus, although the potential risk is great, it may not be reliable enough for men to be sensitive to its relation to their own mate value.

Given this logic, we could hypothesize that men's reports would be sensitive to a relationship between men's own mate value and mate retention behaviors which are predictably costly, as is true with men's benefit-provisioning behaviors. However, this

Table 2

Multiple regression analyses for men's self-reports of men's and women's mate value predicting men's mate retention behaviors.

| Men's partner directed insults | Mate value (Standardized beta) | | | Full model | |
|----------------------------------|--------------------------------|------|--------|--------------------------------------|----------------|
| | Women | Men | F | (df _B , df _w) | R ² |
| Cost inflicting behaviors | .17 | -.16 | 1.67 | (2, 137) | .01 |
| Direct guarding | .09 | -.09 | 0.42 | (2, 138) | .01 |
| Intersexual negative inducements | .28** | -.15 | 3.91* | (2, 138) | .04 |
| Intrasexual negative inducements | -.02 | -.14 | 1.74 | (2, 139) | .01 |
| Benefit provisioning behaviors | .22* | .08 | 5.00** | (2, 131) | .06 |
| Positive inducements | .22* | .01 | 3.40* | (2, 133) | .03 |
| Public signals of possession | .19 | .10 | 4.92** | (2, 137) | .05 |

* $p < .05$.

** $p < .01$.

hypothesis would fail to account for the fact that men are only likely to outlay these known costs when his partner is of high enough value to warrant such costs. We would not expect a man to invest known costs in a low value woman, regardless of how able he would be to do so. So, we in fact hypothesized that men's reports of their benefit-provisioning behaviors would be predicted by men's reports of their partner's mate value, which is supported by our data. Benefit-provisioning mate retention behaviors may only be available to those men who can afford the required costly initial investment, but even those men will only make that investment when their partners are of high enough value.

Results similar to those obtained via women's reports are obtained via men's reports in terms of full model prediction of men's mate retention behaviors, although the effect sizes are roughly half that obtained via women's reports. We interpret this to be support for the existence of the relationships between mate value and men's mate retention behaviors, although the salience of this relationship differs between men and women based on the reliability and predictability of the costs associated with those behaviors.

5. Limitations and future directions

One possible limitation of the current study is the narrow range of cost-inflicting mate retention behaviors that were assessed. This class of mate-retention tactics can be expanded to include behaviors that are significantly more costly to both the women toward whom they are directed as well as to the men who use them. For instance, partner-directed sexual coercion has also been proposed as a mate-retention tactic, which likely carries a substantially higher potential cost to women (e.g., physical and psychological consequences of rape by an intimate partner) and men (e.g., retaliation by her family and/or society). Future research that includes these more extreme cost-inflicting mate retention behaviors may inves-

tigate the extent to which the relationship between mate-value and mate retention persists given the variation in cost.

Future research may also investigate the extent to which the relationship between mate-value and mate retention persists when the mate retention behaviors are performed by women. It is presently difficult to hypothesize as to the nature of the relationship between mate-value and women's mate retention behaviors as most of the literature focuses specifically on men's behaviors. Consequently, little is known about if, when, and how women may engage in mate retention behaviors.

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