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Mate Value Both Positively and Negatively Predicts Intentions to Commit an Infidelity

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Abstract

As a socially monogamous species, humans generally have one committed romantic partner at a time, but sometimes engage in infidelity. Previous research has related infidelity to individual difference traits, including global assessments of “mate value” (relative value as a romantic partner on the “mating market”). We explored the extent to which one’s intention to commit an infidelity is uniquely predicted by different components of mate value. The results confirm a negative relationship between one’s overall mate value and one’s intention to commit an infidelity, and also identify four distinct mate value components (agreeableness/commitment, surgency, emotional stability, and physical attractiveness) that uniquely predict infidelity intention. Two of these factors, surgency (for women) and agreeableness/commitment (for men), *positively* predict anticipated infidelity. Additionally, the results indicate that men’s but not women’s infidelity intention is better predicted by the combination of their own and their partner’s mate value. Discussion includes interpretations of the results in terms of potential social or personal advancement.

Keywords: infidelity, mate value, agreeableness, commitment, surgency

1. Introduction

Humans are a socially monogamous species (Lukas & Clutton-Brock, 2013). This mating system is characterized by the social and romantic bonding of two individuals, but sexual or romantic exclusivity is not guaranteed. Although people generally have only one romantic partner at a time, they may concurrently engage in sexual or romantic activity (i.e., commit an infidelity) with a different partner. Greater than 25% of partnered individuals engage in infidelity (Drigotas & Barta, 2001). The likelihood of an individual committing an infidelity has been associated with many variables, from sex (male, female) and type of infidelity to relationship quality and personality characteristics of the partners.

Relevant to relationship quality, commitment to and satisfaction with the relationship predict infidelity. Specifically, people who report greater relationship commitment, or who have plans to demonstrate commitment such as through marriage, are less likely to commit an infidelity (Drigotas, Safstrom, & Gentilia, 1999; Maddox Shaw, Rhoades, Allen, Stanley, & Markman, 2013). Similarly, people who are more satisfied with their relationship are less likely to commit an infidelity (Maddox Shaw et al., 2013; Martins et al., 2016; Shackelford, Besser, & Goetz, 2008). This may be, in part, because infidelity is positively related to relationship dissolution (Lampard, 2014), which in turn is related to psychological distress, negative changes in life satisfaction, and reduced health (Chung et al., 2002; Rhoades, Kamp Dush, Atkins, Stanley, & Markman, 2011). In short, people in good relationships may not want to risk losing that relationship by committing an infidelity.

On the other hand, not all relationship dissolutions are equally detrimental. Many people experience a period of personal growth following relationship dissolution, particularly if the relationship was of relatively low quality (Lewandowski & Bizzoco, 2007; Tashiro & Frazier,

2003). People in such relationships may not have the same aversion to the risk of relationship dissolution as do those in higher quality relationships, and so behave differently. Indeed, people in relationships characterized by more negative interactions, such as poor communication and psychological and physical aggression, are more likely to report committing an infidelity (Maddox Shaw et al., 2013), as are individuals in relationships they perceive to provide fewer opportunities for need fulfillment or self-expansion (Lewandowski & Ackerman, 2006).

Research using causal modeling to map the associations between relationship satisfaction and infidelity points to the importance of individual differences in members of the couple. Specifically, a substantial portion of relationship satisfaction, which predicts infidelity, appears to be caused by a partner's low conscientiousness and low agreeableness (Shackelford et al., 2008), two of the "Big Five" personality factors identified as strong personality predictors of infidelity (Barta & Kiene, 2005; Buss & Shackelford, 1997b). In other words, individuals who are hardworking and detail-oriented (conscientious) and are kind and friendly (agreeable) are more likely to be satisfied in their relationships, and so may be less likely to be unfaithful. In fact, in a large, cross-national study of personality characteristics associated with infidelity, agreeableness emerged above all other personality factors as the largest negative predictor of committing an infidelity (Schmitt, 2004).

Other individual difference traits, besides those associated with the Big Five factors, have also been linked to infidelity. For instance, the Dark Triad of narcissism (Buss & Shackelford, 1997b), psychopathy, and Machiavellianism (Jones & Weiser, 2014) have been positively associated with infidelity. Although this association has been interpreted in terms of destructive relationship behaviors (Jones & Weiser, 2014), these characteristics also may be indicative of perceived access to extra-pair mates. For example, among men, narcissism has been positively

associated with attractiveness, such that women perceive men displaying narcissistic traits to be more attractive (Carter, Campbell, & Muncer, 2014). Additionally, these high-narcissism men may be both more likely to expend effort to increase perceptions of their attractiveness (Fox & Rooney, 2015) and to decrease their standards for selecting short-term mates (Jonason, Valentine, Li, & Harbeson, 2011). Together, these conditions may increase perceptions of the availability of extra-pair mating opportunities, a circumstance independently associated with the likelihood of committing an infidelity (Martins et al., 2016).

Attractiveness and access to high-value mates are indicative of one's own "mate value" (i.e., an individual's overall attractiveness as a potential mate on the "mating market"). That both characteristics are also related to infidelity suggests that mate value may be related to infidelity. Indeed, research indicates that mate value, as assessed by a global measure of attractiveness as a potential mate, predicts infidelity intentions, such that individuals with greater mate value than their long-term partners are more likely to report an intention to commit an infidelity (Buss & Shackelford, 1997a).

This positive relationship between relative mate value and infidelity supports the general hypotheses that infidelity is more likely among individuals with relatively attractive qualities or more infidelity opportunities. However, the positive relationship between relative mate value and infidelity complicates the interpretation of other evidence linking characteristics indicative of high mate value to lower likelihood of infidelity. For instance, agreeableness (Botwin, Buss, & Shackelford, 1997; Figueredo, Sefcek, & Jones, 2006) and sensation-seeking (Hugill, Fink, Neave, Besson, & Bunse, 2011) have been positively linked to mate value, such that individuals who are kind and friendly as well as those who seek out new and intense life experiences are perceived to be of higher mate value. However, these same traits also have been negatively

linked to infidelity (Barta & Kiene, 2005; Buss & Shackelford, 1997b; O'Sullivan & Ronis, 2013; Schmitt, 2004). This suggests that different components of mate value may be differentially related to risk of infidelity. The current study explored this possibility, by evaluating the relationship between mate value and infidelity using an overall mate value score as well as scores along six different factors of mate value: agreeableness/commitment, resource potential, physical prowess, emotional stability, surgency, and physical attractiveness.

Additionally, given (1) sex differences in infidelity prevalence (Blow & Hartnett, 2005; Brand, Markey, Mills, & Hodges, 2007), (2) sex differences in reported mate value preferences (Buss, 1989; Eastwick & Finkel, 2008), (3) research identifying the importance of mate value discrepancy rather than absolute mate value (Buss & Shackelford, 1997b), and (4) the potential importance of differentiating sexual infidelity from emotional infidelity (Martins et al., 2016), we explored the extent to which infidelity intentions are influenced by the inclusion of one's partner's mate value in addition to one's own mate value, and the extent to which these predictions are moderated by participant sex and infidelity type.

2. Methods

2.1 Participants

The data analyzed for this article were collected as part of a larger study on individual differences in men's and women's mating behaviors. Different analyses from subsamples of this dataset, testing different hypotheses, have been presented elsewhere (see, e.g., XXX).

Participants were drawn from universities and surrounding communities. All participants reported being in a committed, heterosexual relationship at the time of participation. For the current article, participants' responses were included for analysis if they provided complete data for variables related to their own anticipated infidelity and their perceptions of their own and

their partner's mate value. This resulted in a final sample of 312 participants (155 females) with a mean age of 24.1 years ($SD = 7.1$), a mean relationship length of 3.2 years ($SD = 4.6$), and mean partner age of 25.1 years ($SD = 8.3$). Participants registered in undergraduate psychology courses at the time of participation were offered partial course credit as incentive ($n = 240$). No other incentives were provided.

2.2 Materials

All participants completed an online survey, including a questionnaire soliciting information on their age, their partners' age, and the length of the current relationship. Participants then completed two versions – a self-report and a partner-report – of the Trait Specific Dependence Inventory (Ellis, Simpson, & Campbell, 2002). The TSDI is a 34-item inventory that assesses mate value-relevant individual difference characteristics along six factors: agreeableness/commitment (9 items; $\alpha_{\text{self}} = .91$, $\alpha_{\text{partner}} = .92$), resource accruing potential (10 items; $\alpha_{\text{self}} = .89$, $\alpha_{\text{partner}} = .92$), physical prowess (3 items; $\alpha_{\text{self}} = .77$, $\alpha_{\text{partner}} = .68$), emotional stability (4 items; $\alpha_{\text{self}} = .73$, $\alpha_{\text{partner}} = .78$), surgency (5 items; $\alpha_{\text{self}} = .82$, $\alpha_{\text{partner}} = .84$), and physical attractiveness (3 items; $\alpha_{\text{self}} = .97$, $\alpha_{\text{partner}} = .87$). The self-report version assessed the participant's mate value relative to same-sex rivals (e.g., "If you and your current partner broke up, how difficult would it be for your partner to find someone who is as [physically attractive/ generous/ ambitious/ practical/ etc.] as you?"). The partner-report version assessed the participant's partners' mate value relative to potential alternatives (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 attractive?"). All responses were recorded on a Likert scale anchored by 1 = *Not difficult at all* and 5 = *Extremely difficult*, such that higher scores indicate higher mate value. The TSDI has

been established as a valid and reliable measure of mate value in romantic relationships (Ellis et al., 2002).

Participants also answered two questions about their own intentions to commit an infidelity while still in a relationship with their current partner: “How likely do you think it is that you will in the future [have sexual intercourse with/fall in love with] someone other than your current partner, while in a relationship with your current partner?” Responses were recorded on a Likert scale anchored by 0 = *Definitely no* to 9 = *Definitely yes*.

3. Results

In this sample, 66% of women and 51% of men reported zero intention to commit a sexual infidelity, and 52% of women and 45% of men reported zero intention to commit an emotional infidelity. Given the non-normal distribution skewed toward zero, each infidelity variable was dichotomized into *no intention* and *at least some intention* to commit an infidelity.

We conducted several logistic regressions, predicting intention to commit an infidelity (sexual and emotional) from self and partner mate value, for both men and women. For each regression, the mate value of the person whose behavior was being predicted was entered in block 1, with the partners’ mate value entered in block 2. All predictor variables were standardized prior to analysis, to aid in the interpretation of the odds ratios.

3.1 Total Mate Value

For each participant, total mate value scores for self and partner were obtained by summing scores across each of the six factors of the TSDI. To confirm results of previous research demonstrating (1) a negative relationship between overall mate value and infidelity and (2) that the relationship between own mate value and infidelity is influenced by partner mate

value, we conducted four logistic regression analyses predicting men's and women's intentions to commit sexual and emotional infidelity from their own and their partner's total mate value.

3.1.1. Women's anticipated sexual infidelity. Women's total mate value, when entered as the only predictor, negatively predicted their own sexual infidelity intention, $\chi^2(1) = 6.23, p = .013$, Hosmer-Lemeshow $R^2 = .03$. However, the model was improved by including women's partner's value as a second predictor, $\Delta \chi^2(1) = 4.11, p = .043$, with women's partner's total mate value remaining the only unique predictor of women's intention to commit a sexual infidelity, $\beta = -0.42, p = .044$.

3.1.2. Women's anticipated emotional infidelity. A different pattern of results emerged when predicting women's emotional infidelity intention. Again, women's own total mate value negatively predicted their own intention to commit emotional infidelity, $\chi^2(1) = 12.58$, Hosmer-Lemeshow $R^2 = .06$. Entering women's partner's total mate value as a second predictor did not change the model's predictive utility (although the statistic approached significance), $\Delta \chi^2(1) = 3.82, p = .051$, and women's own total mate value remained the only unique predictor of women's likelihood of emotional infidelity, $\beta = -0.44, p = .033$.

3.1.3. Men's anticipated sexual infidelity. Men's total mate value did not predict men's likelihood of sexual infidelity, $\chi^2(1) = 3.65, p = .056$, Hosmer-Lemeshow $R^2 = .02$, although this statistic approach significance. Entering men's partner's total mate value as a second predictor, however, improved the predictive utility of the overall model, $\Delta \chi^2(1) = 18.39, p < .001$, with men's partner's total mate value remaining the only unique predictor of men's likelihood of sexual infidelity, $\beta = -0.88, p < .001$.

3.1.4. Men's anticipated emotional infidelity. Unlike men's sexual infidelity, men's emotional infidelity was negatively predicted by men's total mate value, $\chi^2(1) = 14.37$, Hosmer-

Lemeshow $R^2 = .07$. Again, entering men's partner's total mate value as a second predictor improved the predictive utility of the overall model, $\Delta \chi^2 (1) = 18.90, p < .001$, with men's partner's total mate value remaining the only unique predictor of men's emotional infidelity, $\beta = -0.92, p < .001$.

3.2 Mate Value Factors

3.2.1. Women's anticipated sexual infidelity. Overall, women's self-perceived mate value factors predicted their own sexual infidelity intention, $\chi^2 (6) = 29.66, p < .001$, Hosmer-Lemeshow $R^2 = .15$. Including women's partners' mate value factors did not improve the model, $\Delta \chi^2 (6) = 6.60, p = .359$. Moreover, the Akaike information criterion (AIC) value, an assessment of model fit correcting for the number of model predictors, was lower for model 1 than for model 2, suggesting that model 1 was a better fit. Consequently, model 1 was retained. As displayed in Table 1, women's agreeableness/commitment and surgency were the only unique predictors. Supporting previous research, agreeableness/commitment negatively predicted women's sexual infidelity intention. Additionally, surgency positively predicted women's sexual infidelity intention. Analyses of the odds ratios indicate that a single standard deviation increase in agreeableness/commitment was associated with a 63% decrease in the odds of reporting at least some intention of committing a sexual infidelity, and a single standard deviation increase in surgency was associated with an 89% increase in the odds of reporting at least some intention of committing a sexual infidelity.

3.2.2. Women's anticipated emotional infidelity. Women's self-perceived mate value factors predicted their own likelihood of reporting at least some chance of emotional infidelity, $\chi^2 (6) = 31.69, p < .001$, Hosmer-Lemeshow $R^2 = .15$. Including women's partners' mate value factors did not improve the model, $\Delta \chi^2 (6) = 4.29, p = .638$. Again, the AIC value was lower for

model 1 than for model 2. Consequently, model 1 was retained. As displayed in Table 2, women's agreeableness/commitment was the only unique predictor. Further supporting previous research, women's agreeableness/commitment negatively predicted their emotional infidelity intention. Analyses of the odds ratios indicated that a single standard deviation increase in agreeableness/commitment was associated with 65% decrease in the odds of reporting at least some intention to commit an emotional infidelity.

3.3.3. Men's anticipated sexual infidelity. Overall, men's own mate value factors predicted their sexual infidelity intention, $\chi^2(6) = 24.57, p < .001$, Hosmer-Lemeshow $R^2 = .11$. Unlike the results from women's data, including men's partners' mate value factors improved the model's predictive utility, $\Delta \chi^2(6) = 23.16, p < .001$. In this case, the AIC value for model 2 was lower than for model 1. Consequently, model 2 was retained. As displayed in Table 3, the only unique predictor of men's anticipated sexual infidelity intention was their partner's physical attractiveness. Analysis of the odds ratio indicated that a single standard deviation increase in men's partners' physical attractiveness was associated with a 92% decrease in the odds of reporting at least some intention to commit a sexual infidelity.

3.3.4. Men's anticipated emotional infidelity. Men's own mate value factors predicted their own emotional infidelity intention, $\chi^2(6) = 21.28, p = .002$, Hosmer-Lemeshow $R^2 = .10$. As with men's sexual infidelity, including men's partners' mate value factors improved the model's predictive utility, $\Delta \chi^2(6) = 29.07, p < .001$. Again, the AIC value for model 2 was lower than for model 1. Consequently, model 2 was retained. As displayed in Table 4, men's agreeableness/commitment, men's emotional stability, men's partners' agreeableness/commitment, and men's partners' physical attractiveness all emerged as unique predictors. Contrary to previous research, men's agreeableness/commitment *positively* predicted emotional

infidelity intention. Men's emotional stability, men's partner's agreeableness/commitment, and men's partner's physical attractiveness, on the other hand, negatively predicted the intention to commit an emotional infidelity. Analyses of the odds ratios indicated the following: a single standard deviation increase in men's agreeableness/commitment was associated with an 82% *increase* in the odds of reporting at least some intention to commit an emotional infidelity; a single standard deviation increase in men's emotional stability was associated with a 56% decrease in the odds of reporting at least some intention to commit an emotional infidelity; a single standard deviation increase in men's partners' agreeableness/commitment was associated with a 96% decrease in the odds of reporting at least some intention to commit an emotional infidelity; and a single standard deviation increase in men's partners' physical attractiveness was associated with an 87% decrease in the odds of reporting at least some intention to commit an emotional infidelity.

4. Discussion

Separating overall mate value into several distinct mate value factors supported the hypothesis that different facets of mate value are differentially predictive of infidelity. For both men and women, the factors that positively predicted infidelity intention were those factors most likely to be associated with a consequential net gain in terms of one's own and one's partner's mate value. In other words, the likelihood of reporting some intention to commit an infidelity in is higher when that infidelity is more likely to result in an increase in one's own mate value, or in the replacement of one's current partner with a new partner who is comparatively more valuable.

There are, however, sex differences in which mate value factors tip the cost-benefit balance in favor of infidelity. These sex differences are likely indicative of differences in minimal parental investment, as well as differences in the benefits that men and women can

secure from engaging in long-term committed partnerships. For instance, women have historically gained resources and social status from male partners. In the current study, women who reported themselves to be higher in surgency – a trait indicative of one’s interest in and ability to become upwardly mobile in a social hierarchy (Ellis et al., 2002) – were more likely to also report at least some intention to commit a sexual infidelity. This may provide support for the theory that female infidelity serves as a method of “trading up” (Drigotas & Barta, 2001), whereby women who are more likely to have goals related to resources and social status also may be more motivated to seek out opportunities to acquire such things, some of which may present themselves in the form of sexual relationships with men who are not their primary partners.

Men, on the other hand, are less likely to receive such material resources from women. Rather, a primary benefit they secure from long-term partnerships is sexual access. As members of a species in which females invest substantially more in offspring than do males, women tend to be choosier and more cautious in their sexual and romantic behavior (Lippa, 2009; Schmitt, 2003; Trivers, 1972). Consequently, it is often the more selective women who determine when and with whom the less investing men have sex. This may explain why men, but not women, have their reproductive behaviors partly determined by traits of the partners who grant them sexual access.

Women’s relative selectivity may also explain the finding that men’s agreeableness/commitment *positively* predicted their own infidelity intentions. This initially seems counterintuitive, as agreeableness and commitment have been reliably demonstrated, in this study and others, to be negatively related to infidelity. A review of the analyses, however, indicates that it is only after including men’s partner’s value in the model that men’s

agreeableness/commitment becomes a significantly positive predictor. This may indicate that, when men's partner's mate value traits are considered, men who are more agreeable and/or commitment-oriented may be more likely to attract positive attention from women who are not their primary partners, who may be of higher value than their primary partners, and who may be willing to provide sexual access. And as perception of alternative mates has been identified as a positive predictor of infidelity behaviors (Martins et al., 2016), so too may men's agreeability/commitment.

5. Limitations and Future Directions

The results presented here rely on self-reports of the likelihood of a future behavior. It may be that one's actual future behavior bears little resemblance to one's intentions. As infidelity of either type is typically perceived to be negative, it may be that people underreport their actual infidelity intentions. However, the opposite also may be true. For instance, an individual may be willing, even eager, to engage in an infidelity, but may never be presented with a viable opportunity. As opportunity has been determined to be a positive predictor of infidelity, (Jackman, 2014; Martins et al., 2016), it may be that intention to commit an infidelity becomes moot in the absence of opportunity. Still, the intention to commit an infidelity may motivate one to seek out opportunity, thus creating opportunities for infidelity not found by those with no infidelity intention. Further research addressing the relationship between perceived likelihood of infidelity and actual infidelity, as well as infidelity intention and opportunity, is needed to address these issues.

6. Conclusions

Despite the fact that infidelity is largely taboo, more than half of our sample – 54% of women and 66% of men – reported at least some intention to commit an emotional or sexual

infidelity. Generally, the results are consistent with previous research indicating a negative relationship between infidelity and mate value. However, for both men (agreeableness/commitment) and women (surgency), one mate value factor positively predicted infidelity intention. Together, these results suggest that infidelity risk may follow a cost-benefit pattern, which is influenced by the relative mate value of the individuals in the relationship. Specifically, infidelity risk is higher when the potential benefits gained from infidelity are higher, such as securing an increase in one's own value or securing a more valuable partner, and lower when the potential cost of committing an infidelity is higher, such as losing a high-value partner.

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