

Not all men are sexually coercive: A preliminary investigation of the moderating effect of mate desirability on the relationship between female infidelity and male sexual coercion

Valerie G. Starratt*, Danielle Popp, Todd K. Shackelford

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

Received 12 September 2007; received in revised form 12 February 2008; accepted 18 February 2008

Abstract

Previous research has demonstrated the utility of men's perceptions of their partner's infidelity as a predictor of male sexual coercion in the context of an intimate relationship (Goetz & Shackelford, 2006; Starratt, Goetz, Shackelford, McKibbin, & Stewart-Williams, *in press*). Not all men who suspect partner infidelity are sexually coercive, however. Using reports secured from 280 men in a committed, sexual relationship with a woman, the current research provides preliminary evidence of a moderating effect of relative mate desirability in the relationship between perceptions of female infidelity and male sexual coercion. Specifically, men's perceptions of their partner's infidelity are positively related to men's sexual coercion only in those relationships in which the man perceives that he is of equal or greater desirability than his partner. Men's perceptions of their partner's infidelity are not related to sexual coercion by men who perceive that they are less desirable than their partners. The discussion addresses interpretations of these findings, limitations of the current study, and directions for future research.

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Keywords: Female infidelity; Male sexual coercion; Mate desirability; Evolutionary psychology

1. Female infidelity, male sexual coercion, and relative mate desirability

Men sometimes attempt to control their intimate partners. One form of coercion used by men is sexual coercion. In an intimate relationship, sexual coercion can include forcible rape but often takes the form of more subtle tactics, such as withholding financial resources if a woman does not consent to sex (Carr & VanDeusen, 2004; Johnson & Sigler, 2000; Marshall & Holtzworth-Munroe, 2002; Shackelford & Goetz, 2004). Regardless of whether sexual coercion is physical or non-physical, women who have been sexually coerced by an intimate partner experience negative physical and psychological consequences, including poor body image, low self-esteem, social anxiety,

unplanned pregnancy, and contraction of a sexually transmitted disease (Campbell, 1989; Livingston, Buddie, Testa, & VanZile-Tamsen, 2004; Zweig, Crockett, Sayer, & Vicary, 1999). Identifying the predictors and correlates of sexual coercion will better position researchers to develop interventions aimed at reducing this costly behavior.

The current study investigates men's sexual coercion using the Sexual Coercion in Intimate Relationships Scale (SCIRS; Shackelford & Goetz, 2004). The SCIRS differs from other measures of sexual coercion, such as the Aggressive Sexual Behavior Inventory (Mosher & Anderson, 1986), the Sexual Situation Questionnaire (O'Sullivan & Byers, 1993), and the Coercive Sexuality Scale (Rapaport & Burkhart, 1984), in that it specifically assesses coercion in the context of an intimate relationship, rather than between casually dating partners. The SCIRS also assesses a variety of behaviors, from outright physical force (e.g., "I physically forced my partner to have sex with me") to more

* Corresponding author.

E-mail address: vstarratt@fau.edu (V.G. Starratt).

subtle manipulations (e.g., “I hinted that if my partner loved me she would have sex with me”).

Several predictors of sexual coercion in the context of an intimate relationship have been identified, including male low self-esteem (Burke, Stets, & Pirog-Good, 1988), male alcohol and pornography consumption (Carr & VanDeusen, 2004), and male sexual jealousy (Frieze, 1983). Goetz and Shackelford (2006) also identified men’s perceptions of their partner’s infidelity as a predictor of sexual coercion. The current research extends investigation of this relationship by including a measure of relative mate desirability as a moderating factor.

Goetz and Shackelford (2006) reported that men’s perceptions of their partner’s infidelity (i.e., ratings of the likelihood that their partners had sex with another man over the duration of the current relationship) are related positively to men’s sexual coercion of their partner. Goetz and Shackelford argue that, in addition to forcible rape of their partners, men may engage in relatively discrete forms of sexual coercion, such as withholding monetary benefits his partner depends on if she does not consent to sex, in an attempt to lessen the likelihood of his partner’s defection from the relationship. This argument implies that there are costs to men of using sexual coercion (e.g., mate defection) in addition to the proposed benefits (e.g., mate retention, future infidelity deterrence).

Partner infidelity can be so costly to men that even the perceived likelihood of partner infidelity is sufficient to trigger the use of sexually coercive behaviors (Goetz & Shackelford, 2006). Not all men who perceive their partners to be unfaithful engage in sexual coercion, however. Under what circumstances might the benefits of sexual coercion no longer outweigh the costs for some men? The current study investigates one such possible moderator, mate desirability – an evaluation of the characteristics one possesses compared to the characteristics desired by potential mates (Buss & Barnes, 1986). A man’s assessment of his own desirability as a long-term mate relative to his partner’s desirability as a long-term mate may moderate the relationship between perceived female infidelity and male sexual coercion. For example, a man who perceives himself to be less desirable as a mate compared to his partner may not risk sexually coercing his partner, because he is unlikely to secure another partner of such high desirability should his partner defect from the relationship as a result of his coercion. Instead, he may engage in less “risky” coercive or mate guarding behaviors, such as bringing his partner flowers or buying her gifts.

2. Methods

2.1. Participants

Two hundred eighty men, each of whom was in a committed, sexual relationship with a woman, participated in this study. The mean age of the participants was 25.2 years ($SD = 7.5$), the mean age of the participants’ partners was

23.9 years ($SD = 6.8$), and the mean relationship length was 46.2 months ($SD = 53.1$). Participants were drawn from universities and surrounding metropolitan communities. Due to the sensitive nature of the topic and to assure anonymity, no further demographic information was collected.

2.2. Materials

Participants completed a demographic questionnaire that solicited information on the participant’s age, his partner’s age, and the duration of his current relationship. This questionnaire also collected information on the participant’s perceptions of his own desirability as a mate compared to his partner’s desirability as a mate and his perception of his partner’s previous infidelity. Mate desirability is a measure of desirability as a mate compared to that of his partner (see Buss, 2003, for review). Men were asked, “Who is more desirable as a long-term partner?” and then responded on a 10-point ordered category scale anchored by 0 = I am much more desirable as a long-term partner and 9 = My partner is much more desirable as a long-term partner. Based on their responses to this question, men were placed into one of three categories. Men who responded with scores of 0–3 were categorized as perceiving themselves to be more desirable than their current partner. Men who responded with scores of 4–5 were categorized as perceiving that he and his partner are equally desirable as mates. Men who responded with scores of 6–9 were categorized as perceiving themselves to be less desirable than their current partner. Female infidelity was a measure of a man’s perception of his partner’s past infidelity. Men were asked, “As far as you know, has your current partner had sexual intercourse with someone other than you since you have been involved in a relationship together?” Men then respond on a 10-point ordered category scale anchored by 0 = Definitely No and 9 = Definitely Yes. There is not yet an empirical literature on the accuracy of men’s perceptions of their partner’s infidelity. However, we expect that men’s behaviors will vary with their perceptions of partner infidelity and not necessarily with actual partner infidelity. We do not expect men to alter their behavior if their partner had been unfaithful but they were not aware of the infidelity. In the same manner, we expect men to alter their behavior if they perceived that their partner had been unfaithful, even if these perceptions were not accurate.

Upon completion of the demographic questionnaire, participants completed the SCIRS (Shackelford & Goetz, 2004). The SCIRS secures information about how often the participant performed 34 sexually coercive acts in the past month. Items in the SCIRS vary in subtlety, ranging from hinting and subtle manipulations to outright physical force. These 34 items cluster into three components: Resource Manipulation/Violence (e.g., “I hinted that I would withhold benefits that my partner depends on if she did not have sex with me”, “I physically forced my

Table 1
Summary of linear regression analyses for the relationship between men's perceptions of female infidelity and men's sexual coercion, moderated by relative mate desirability

β	Who is more desirable?			
	All participants <i>B</i> (<i>SE B</i>) β	I am <i>B</i> (<i>SE B</i>) β	Equal <i>B</i> (<i>SE B</i>) β	She is <i>B</i> (<i>SE B</i>) β
SCIRS total	.51(.23) .14*	1.04(.79) .20	.41(.17) .22*	.11(.41) .03
Resource manipulation/violence	.13(.08) .11	.10(.28) .06	.13(.05) .22*	.11(.14) .09
Commitment manipulation	.20(.10) .13*	.70(.28) .37*	.08(.08) .09	-.06(.18) -.03
Defection threat	.18(.09) .13*	.24(.36) .11	.21(.06) .32**	.05(.12) .04

* $p < .05$.

** $p < .01$.

partner to have sex with me”), Commitment Manipulation (e.g., “I told my partner that if she loved me she would have sex with me”), and Defection Threat (e.g., “I hinted that I would have sex with another woman if my partner did not have sex with me”). Previous research has established the reliability, validity, and utility of the SCIRS as an assessment of sexual coercion in intimate relationships (Goetz & Shackelford, 2006; Shackelford & Goetz, 2004).

2.3. Procedure

Three criteria had to be met to qualify for participation. The prospective participant had to be (1) male, (2) at least 18 years of age, and (3) currently involved in a committed, sexual relationship with a woman. If the criteria were met, the researcher handed the participant a consent form, the survey, and a security envelope. The participant was instructed to read and sign the consent form, complete the survey, place the completed survey in the envelope, and then seal the envelope. The participant was instructed not to seal the consent form inside the envelope to maintain anonymity.

3. Results

Total SCIRS scores were calculated by summing responses across all 34 items. Scores for each component of the SCIRS were calculated by summing the responses of each item within that category. Alpha reliabilities for the full-scale SCIRS and the three components of the SCIRS (Resource Manipulation/Violence, Commitment Manipulation, and Defection Threat) were $\alpha = .95, .88, .91$, and $.95$, respectively.

Of the 280 men, 50 were classified as perceiving themselves to be more desirable as a mate than their partners, 124 perceived that they and their partners were equally desirable, and 101 perceived themselves to be less desirable than their partners. Five participants did not provide a response to the question of mate desirability and were excluded from further analyses. These results are consistent with literature indicating that couples tend to consist of individuals of similar mate desirability (for review, see Buss, 2003).

Preliminary analyses of the relationship between men's perceptions of their partners' infidelity and men's sexual coercion were consistent with those reported by Goetz and Shackelford (2006). A linear regression analysis indicated that men's total SCIRS score was positively predicted by perceptions of female infidelity. Additional linear regression analyses were conducted to determine whether perceptions of female infidelity were related positively to the individual categories of the SCIRS. The results indicated that perceptions of female infidelity were related positively to two of the three SCIRS categories, Commitment Manipulation and Defection Threat. Resource Manipulation/Violence was not related to perceptions of female infidelity (see Table 1).

Additional analyses supported the hypothesis that the relationship between female infidelity and men's sexually coercive behavior is moderated by relative mate desirability. For participants in the “I am a more desirable mate than my partner” category, perceptions of female infidelity were not related to total SCIRS scores and were related to scores for only one of the three SCIRS categories, Commitment Manipulation. For participants in the “My partner and I are equally desirable as mates” category, perceptions of female infidelity related positively to total SCIRS scores, and to scores on two of the three SCIRS categories, Resource Manipulation/Violence and Defection Threat. Commitment Manipulation was not related to female infidelity in this group. Perceptions of female infidelity was not related to total SCIRS scores or scores on any of the three SCIRS categories for participants who perceived themselves to be less desirable than their partners (see Table 1).

4. Discussion

The current results support the hypothesis that the relationship between perceptions of female infidelity and male sexual coercion is moderated by relative mate desirability. Specifically, men's perceptions of their partner's infidelity predict the use of Commitment Manipulation as a sexual coercion tactic by men who perceive that they are more desirable than their partners. Perceptions of female infidelity predict the use of Resource Manipulation/Violence and Defection Threat as sexual coercive tactics by men who

perceive that they and their partners are equally valuable. Perceptions of female infidelity are unrelated to men's sexual coercion among men who perceive that they are less desirable than their partners.

The current argument is that relative mate desirability moderates the ratio of costs to benefits of men's use of sexual coercion in an intimate relationship. Sexual coercion has costs; a man who sexually coerces his partner may risk her defection from the relationship, for example (see Goetz & Shackelford, 2006). In the event of a mate's defection, a man loses not only the time and resources he has invested in his mate, but also the opportunity for future offspring that she may have provided. Conversely, men may have evolved psychological mechanisms that promote sexual coercion as an anti-cuckoldry tactic (Goetz & Shackelford, 2006). Because cuckoldry (unwitting investment in genetically unrelated offspring) is reproductively costly, the benefits of sexual coercion preventing cuckoldry may outweigh the risks of sexual coercion causing a partner's defection from the relationship. However, not all men who are at risk for cuckoldry sexually coerce their partners. The results of the current study, for instance, indicate that perceived female infidelity does not predict sexual coercion for men who perceive that their partners are more valuable mates than themselves. This may be because men who are less desirable than their partners believe that, should their partners leave them, they are not likely to attract another partner who is as desirable. Consequently, for these men the risk of losing their partner due to sexual coercion may be higher than the cost of potential cuckoldry. In contrast, men who perceive that they are as desirable as their partners may not have the same concern about the potential loss of their mate. Men in this group may risk sexual coercion because, should this result in mate defection, they may perceive that they are in a position to attract another mate who is at least as desirable as the one they lost.

One might argue that sexual coercion in response to perceived female infidelity increases with men's perceived relative mate desirability. However, this does not appear to be the case. Men who perceive that they are more desirable than their mates are less likely to coerce their partners, compared to men who perceive that they are equally as desirable as their partners, but still more likely than men who perceive that they are less desirable than their partners to engage in sexual coercion in response to female infidelity. This may be because the cost-to-benefit ratio for men who perceive that they are more desirable than their partners is between this ratio for men who perceive that they are less desirable than their partners and men who perceive that they are as desirable as their partners. For instance, men who perceive themselves to be as desirable as their partners may have partners who are desirable enough to not want to risk losing, but not so desirable as to be unlikely to attract a partner of similar desirability should their current partner defect from the relationship as a result of being sexually coerced.

A limitation of this study is the assessment of relative mate desirability and female infidelity using single-item scales of unknown reliability. Future research would benefit from using multi-item assessments of relative mate desirability and female infidelity that will allow for estimates of reliability. Also, it may be that men's mate value relative to his partner serves as a proxy for his ability to attract another mate who is more desirable than his current partner. Because men with higher self-perceived mate desirability tend to be choosier when selecting a long-term partner (Buston & Emlen, 2003), a man who perceives that he is more desirable than his current partner may believe that he can attract a partner who is also more desirable than his current partner. A next step in this research might be to incorporate a measure of perceived ability to secure another partner, such as the Trait-Specific Dependence Inventory (Ellis, Simpson, & Campbell, 2002), a multi-scale inventory that assesses comparisons between current and alternative partners on several dimensions of mate desirability.

In conclusion, the current research provides evidence that the relationship between men's perceptions of their partner's infidelity and men's sexual coercion of their partner is moderated by men's perceptions of relative mate desirability. Men for whom the risk of cuckoldry outweighs the risk of mate defection, according to the current argument, are more likely to sexually coerce their partners. However, when the risk of mate defection outweighs the risk of cuckoldry, men are less likely to engage in sexual coercion.

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