



Original Article

Mate choice preferences in an intergroup context: evidence for a sexual coercion threat-management system among women

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ABSTRACT

Given the importance of reproductive choice in female mating strategies, women may be equipped with a threat-management system that functions to protect reproductive choice by avoiding individuals and situations that have historically posed an increased threat of sexual coercion. Previous research suggests that bias against outgroup men may be one consequence of such a system, resulting from an evolutionary history of intergroup conflict in which women were often at increased risk of sexual assault from outgroup men. We provide a critical extension to this literature by demonstrating that the output of this system is not limited to attitudinal biases, but extends to behavioral decisions regarding dating, particularly among women for whom threats to reproductive choice are most costly and perceived to be most likely. Participants received an unsolicited dating request made by an ingroup or outgroup member, with group boundaries manipulated in a minimal-group paradigm. Consistent with predictions, women self-appraised as vulnerable to sexual coercion were less likely to agree to date requests from outgroup members, but not ingroup members, during the fertile period of the menstrual cycle. Our findings are consistent with the notion that women possess a psychological system that functions to protect reproductive choice by avoiding individuals that historically posed an increased threat of sexual coercion, and that this system may be calibrated to be most strongly activated among women who both appraise themselves as vulnerable and for whom threats to reproductive choice are most costly.

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1. Introduction

A threat-management perspective (Neuberg, Kenrick, & Schaller, 2011) suggests that humans are equipped with psychological systems for coping with adaptive challenges to biological fitness. Such systems are thought to be characterized by a suite of mechanisms adaptively tuned to perceptual cues in the environment that increase or decrease the risk of harm to the individual, as well as to individual characteristics that make an individual more or less vulnerable to such threats. Based on previous theory and research (e.g. McDonald, Asher, Kerr, & Navarrete, 2011; Navarrete, Fessler, Fleischman, & Geyer, 2009; Navarrete, McDonald, Molina, & Sidanius, 2010), we propose that women may be equipped with a threat-management system that functions to protect reproductive choice by avoiding individuals that may have historically posed an increased threat of sexual coercion, particularly when threats to reproductive choice are most costly and probable.

Drawing on this theoretical framework, we investigate whether women who appraise themselves as more vulnerable to sexual coercion exhibit a greater tendency to deny date requests from outgroup men when they are at increased risk of conception.

1.1. Reproductive choice in female mating strategies

A key biological difference between males and females is the level of parental investment required of each in order to produce viable offspring, such that the obligatory investment of females is much greater than that of males (Bateman, 1948; Trivers, 1972). This incentivizes female mating strategies that prioritize the selection of high quality mates. As such, maintaining control over reproductive choice is a critical factor for increasing reproductive success among females. Attempts by males to subvert reproductive choice are potentially quite costly to females because they (1) inhibit a female's ability to exert control over her mate's genetic quality, (2) preclude selection for traits that indicate a paternal willingness to invest resources in offspring, (3) increase the risk of abandonment by an existing male partner who leaves to avoid the potential costs of cuckoldry, and (4) may increase the probability of injury or exposure to disease (e.g. Navarrete & Fessler, 2006; Thornhill & Palmer, 2000; Ullman & Knight, 1991). If sexually coercive mating tactics were a persistent threat to female reproductive success

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throughout evolutionary history, then selection may have favored a psychological system for protecting reproductive choice that includes mechanisms for avoiding individuals and situations that pose a threat of sexual coercion.

1.2. Mechanisms of a sexual coercion threat management system

A system that produces avoidant behavior cannot operate without costs (e.g. time, attention, energy, and foregone opportunities). To minimize costs and maximize benefits, such a system is likely to be calibrated so that avoidant behaviors are most likely to occur when threats pose the greatest cost. In terms of protecting reproductive choice, sexual coercion is most costly to women when it could result in conception. The risk of conception for women varies across the menstrual cycle, peaking on the day of ovulation and the immediately preceding days (Wilcox, Weinberg, & Baird, 1995; Wilcox, Dunson, Weinberg, Trussell, & Baird, 2001). Given this fact, we posit that avoidant behavior that functions to minimize the risk of sexual coercion may track conception risk across the menstrual cycle.

A psychological system for protecting reproductive choice should be attuned not only to time periods when sexual coercion is most costly (i.e. peak conception risk), but also when the likelihood of sexual coercion increases. Throughout human history, intergroup conflict has provided greater affordances for sexual violence to be perpetrated against women, especially by men of the invading group (Lalumière, Harris, Quinsey, & Rice, 2005). Such affordances include the absence of consenting heterosexual mating options, antagonistic attitudes toward the victims' group, and a reduced likelihood of punishment or retaliation (Smuts, 1996). Indeed, the weight of evidence suggests that, throughout evolutionary history, intergroup conflict has increased a woman's risk of becoming the victim of sexual violence (Brownmiller, 1975; Buss, 1998; Chagnon, 1988; Chang, 1997; Epp, 1997; Lawson, 1989; Mezey, 1994; Niarchos, 1995; Roland, 1997; Rosenman, 2000; Sanday, 1981; Seifert, 1996).

Given the risk of sexual coercion associated with intergroup conflict, and the persistence of conflict throughout evolutionary history (Keeley, 1996; Pinker, 2011), the association between sexual coercion and outgroup men may have been quite strong for women. Although ingroup men were also likely to have used sexually coercive mating tactics, many of women's interactions with ingroup men would have included beneficial support in the form of food, shelter, and protection from predators and intergroup attack. Additionally, ingroup men are likely subject to greater monitoring from the ingroup with the potential to be sanctioned for coercive behavior. As a result, outgroup men may have been perceived as a more probable threat of sexual assault than ingroup men, particularly when controlling for the amount of time spent, and the nature of interactions, with members of each group (Navarrete & Tybur, 2013; Navarrete et al., 2010). For these reasons, women may have evolved specific psychological mechanisms for protecting reproductive choice within intergroup contexts.

In addition to external circumstances that elevate the threat to women's reproductive choice, individual differences in women's perceived vulnerability may also play a role in calibrating a threat-management system for avoiding sexual coercion. Women who appraise themselves as vulnerable to sexual coercion may feel less capable of defending themselves or may feel they are at greater risk of encountering coercive threats. As a result, perceiving oneself as particularly vulnerable to sexual coercion, in combination with an elevated risk of conception, may increase a woman's vigilance against being targeted by men that are perceived as posing a threat of sexual coercion.

Consistent with the theorizing above, a number of recent studies have found support for the proposition that women may possess psychological mechanisms that function to protect reproductive choice via the avoidance of sexually coercive threats (e.g., Bröder & Hohmann,

2003; Chavanne & Gallup, 1998; Fessler, Holbrook, & Fleischman, 2014; Garver-Apgar, Gangestad, & Simpson, 2007; Guéguen, 2012; McDonald et al., 2011; Navarrete et al., 2009, 2010; Petralia & Gallup, 2002) or which function to reduce the costs associated with sexual coercion (Chivers, Seto, Lalumière, Laan, & Grimbos, 2010). Relevant to the current research, in a series of studies Navarrete et al. (2010; Studies 3 and 4) showed that racial bias against outgroup men is elevated among women who appraise themselves as being vulnerable to sexual coercion, even when controlling for domain-general fearfulness. Along similar lines, attitudinal bias against outgroup men was greater among women who appraised themselves as vulnerable to sexual coercion, and this was particularly pronounced among women at peak conception risk in their menstrual cycle (Navarrete et al., 2009). These results are consistent with the notion that women's intergroup bias may be the output of a psychological system that functions to protect reproductive choice.

1.3. The current research

Previous research suggests that women evaluate outgroup men more negatively when their risk of conception is elevated, particularly among women who express greater vulnerability to sexual coercion. However, research has yet to link these attitudinal responses to actual behavior. To address this issue, we examined men and women's behavioral responses to dating requests made by individuals identified as ingroup or outgroup members.

1.3.1. Key prediction

Given the goal of protecting reproductive choice and the potential threat to this goal that outgroup men may have posed throughout evolutionary history, we predicted that women would be less willing to accept date requests from outgroup members when conception risk and appraisals of vulnerability to sexual coercion are high. We posit that this combination of elevated conception risk and vulnerability to sexual coercion is critically important, given that there may be competing psychological systems at play when evaluating outgroup men. The system we describe here functions to protect reproductive choice by increasing negative judgments of outgroup men as a function of conception risk. However, a separate system may also be operative that serves to capitalize on the potential benefits of exogenous mating with males possessing genetic profiles optimally distinct from one's own. Such a strategy may reduce the likelihood that offspring will inherit congenital disorders, or be vulnerable to disease and parasites (e.g. Roberts & Little, 2008; Wedekind, Seebeck, Bettens, & Paepke, 1995). Research informed by this view demonstrates that women's sexual response to their partners decreases as the proportion of shared alleles associated with the immune system increases (Garver-Apgar, Gangestad, Thornhill, Miller, & Olp, 2006).

Which of these competing systems is activated may depend on numerous inputs orthogonal to disease concerns, including the level of one's self-appraised vulnerability to sexual coercion, whether the context suggests the presence of intergroup conflict, and whether the outgroup is perceived as physically formidable. Given the historical association between outgroup men and sexual coercion in intergroup contexts, our key prediction is that women will be less likely to accept date requests from outgroup members, when (a) threats to reproductive choice are most costly due to increased likelihood of conception, and (b) when women appraise themselves as being particularly vulnerable to sexual coercion.

1.3.2. Exploratory hypotheses

We did not make specific predictions about how conception risk and vulnerability to sexual coercion would influence women's willingness to accept date requests from ingroup members. However, previous research on mate choice implies that high fertility may be associated with an increased willingness to respond positively to date requests

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