



## Men's risk-taking predicts their partner-directed cost-inflicting behaviors

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### ARTICLE INFO

#### Keywords:

Cost inflicting mate retention  
Partner-directed retaliation  
Sexual coercion  
Risky behavior  
Path analysis

### ABSTRACT

Within the context of a long-term intimate relationship, men engage in a wide variety of behaviors that function to maintain a partner's investment in and reduce the risks associated with a partner's defection from that relationship. Some of these behaviors entice a partner's continued investment through the provision of benefits, while others inflict costs for defection. These cost-inflicting behaviors, while potentially valuable, are also risky, as they may ultimately increase the odds of a romantic partner's defection or retaliation. Given the riskiness of cost-inflicting behaviors, we hypothesize that men's use of these behaviors can be predicted by men's tendency toward risk-taking behavior more generally, but only when that risk-taking is indicative of lower mate value or relationship investment. To test this hypothesis, we investigated whether and how performance of behaviors within five risk-taking domains (ethical, financial, recreational, health/safety, and social) predict men's use of cost-inflicting behaviors. Using path analysis and data from partner-reports from 122 female undergraduate students in a committed, heterosexual, sexual relationship, we confirmed that men's performance of cost-inflicting behavior is predicted by men's unethical risky behavior and, to a lesser extent, financial and recreational risky behavior.

### 1. Introduction

Long-term romantic partnership between a man and a woman is the most common human mating arrangement and likely conferred benefits to both sexes over human evolutionary history, including greater paternity certainty for men and greater partner investment for women (Buss, 2015). Such partnerships, however, have potential costs. For instance, a man whose partner is unfaithful risks cuckoldry (i.e., unwitting investment in a child to whom he is genetically unrelated; Buss & Shackelford, 1997), and a woman whose partner is unfaithful risks losing partner-provisioned resources (Buss, 2015). To maximize the likelihood of receiving the benefits of monogamy while minimizing the likelihood of incurring the costs of infidelity, both men and women engage in a variety of mate retention behaviors (Buss, 1988). These behaviors prevent a partner's infidelity or defection, either by enticing the partner's continued investment in the relationship or punishing or threatening to punish the partner for infidelity or relationship defection.

Benefit-provisioning mate retention behaviors, such as complimenting a woman on her appearance or displaying love and affection (Buss, 1988; Buss & Shackelford, 1997), are a low-risk method by which men attempt to prevent infidelity or relationship defection. Because these behaviors are likely to increase a woman's self-esteem and

relationship satisfaction (Miner, Starratt, & Shackelford, 2009), they are unlikely to lead to her leaving the relationship. In contrast, cost-inflicting mate retention behaviors—such as preventing a partner from seeing her friends (Buss, Shackelford, & McKibbin, 2008), verbally insulting her (Miner et al., 2009), or sexually coercing her (Shackelford, Goetz, Buss, Euler, & Hoier, 2005; Starratt, Goetz, Shackelford, McKibbin, & Stewart-Williams, 2008)—reduce a partner's social support system and sense of self-worth and increase the likelihood of negative health consequences (e.g., depressive symptoms; Devries et al., 2013), potentially increasing the risk that she will defect the relationship or that she or her family or friends will seek costly retribution.

Because cost-inflicting behaviors are riskier to perform than are benefit-provisioning behaviors, individual differences—in particular, those associated with risk—may affect the performance of mate retention behaviors. Indeed, men who prioritize stability and security less frequently perform cost-inflicting (relative to benefit-provisioning) mate retention behaviors (Lopes, Sela, & Shackelford, 2017). It is as yet unclear, however, whether the inverse is also true. That is, whereas risk averse men appear to engage in fewer cost-inflicting behaviors, do men with a penchant for risk-taking engage in cost-inflicting mate retention with greater frequency?

In answer to this question, we hypothesize a positive relationship between men's risk-taking tendencies and cost-inflicting mate retention

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behaviors. However, risk-taking is not a unidimensional construct (Blais & Weber, 2006), and so its relationship to mate retention may be moderated by the specific type of risk-taking assessed. Specifically, we hypothesize a positive relationship between risk-taking and mate retention only when the type of risk-taking is indicative of low relative mate value (as lower value men are more likely to engage in cost-inflicting mate retention behaviors; Buss & Shackelford, 1997; Miner et al., 2009) or could hinder a man's ability to invest in his current relationship (as investment of resources to the benefit of one's partner and potential offspring is an important component of men's mate value; Buss & Schmitt, 1993; Fisher, Cox, Bennett, & Gavric, 2008). To investigate this, we consider the five separate domains of risk-taking assessed by the Domain-Specific Risk-Taking Scale (DOSPERT; Weber, Blais, & Betz, 2002): ethical, financial, recreational, health/safety, and social.

Men who are ethical risk-takers report a greater likelihood of engaging in behaviors such as “Taking some questionable deductions on your income tax return,” “Having an affair with a married man/woman,” and “Leaving your children alone at home while running an errand.” These behaviors may be demonstrations of poor parenting skills, which is an indicator of low mate value (e.g., Buss, 2015; Fox & Benson, 2004). Additionally, these behaviors may reflect an underlying pathological personality (e.g., disinhibition, antagonism). As both low mate value (Buss & Shackelford, 1997; Miner et al., 2009) and pathological personality scores (Holden, Roof, McCabe, & Zeigler-Hill, 2015) positively correlate with men's use of cost-inflicting mate retention, we predict that men's propensity for ethical risk-taking will be related positively to men's use of cost-inflicting mate retention.

Unlike ethical risk-taking, financial and recreational risk-taking are not necessarily direct indicators of lower mate value or pathological personality. However, both forms of risk-taking are associated with a tendency toward investment of resources in endeavors other than those likely to benefit one's partner and offspring. For example, if one is more likely to express interest in “Betting a day's income on the outcome of a sporting event” (financial risk-taking) or “Piloting a small plane” (recreational risk-taking), that may indicate a willingness to squander valuable resources on things other than one's family. And as willingness to invest in one's partner and her children is valued in a mate, a willingness to invest in other risky endeavors would be considerably less valued in a potential mate (Buss, 2015). Additionally, previous research has documented relationships between both financial risk-taking (e.g., Korman et al., 2008) and recreational risk-taking (El-Bassel, Gilbert, Wu, Go, & Hill, 2005) and intimate partner violence perpetration. Intimate partner violence, in turn, is related to the use of other forms of cost-inflicting mate retention behaviors (Kaighobadi, Shackelford, & Goetz, 2009). Therefore, given their negative associations with mate value and positive associations with intimate partner violence, we predict that both financial risk-taking and recreational risk-taking will be positively related to men's use of cost-inflicting mate retention behaviors.

The final two risk-taking domains, health/safety and social risk-taking, are not indicative of the sorts of individual differences that might promote the use of cost-inflicting mate retention behaviors. In fact, behaviors such as “Disagreeing with an authority figure on a major issue” (social risk-taking) may signal traits that women find attractive in men, such as assertiveness (Buss, 2015). Similarly, behaviors such as “Drinking heavily at a social function” (health/safety risk-taking) coincide with masculine norms (Iwamoto, Cheng, Lee, Takamatsu, & Gordon, 2011), and so may indicate higher mate value rather than lower mate value. Additionally, health/safety risk-taking is unrelated to intimate partner violence (Testa, Crane, Quigley, Levitt, & Leonard, 2014). Consequently, we do not predict a direct relationship between health/safety or social risk-taking and the use of cost-inflicting mate retention behaviors.

The aim of the current study was to test the predictions that men's use of cost-inflicting mate retention behaviors would be positively

related to ethical (Prediction 1), financial (Prediction 2), and recreational (Prediction 3) risk-taking, but not to health/safety (Prediction 4) or social (Prediction 5) risk-taking. Because use of cost-inflicting mate retention behaviors and benefit-provisioning mate retention behaviors are not mutually exclusive, and may be positively correlated (Miner et al., 2009), we controlled for performance of benefit-provisioning mate retention behaviors. Additionally, because specific cost-inflicting behaviors in a romantic relationship are more often perpetrated by men than by women (e.g., physical violence; Devries et al., 2013), and because women (relative to men) are more likely to report, and to report more accurately, men's violent behaviors in a relationship (Garcia-Moreno, Jansen, Ellsberg, Heise, & Watts, 2006), we secured women's reports of their partner's behavior.

## 2. Methods

### 2.1. Participants and procedure

Participants were 122 women ( $M_{age} = 22.2$ ,  $SD_{age} = 7.2$ ; partners:  $M_{age} = 24.2$ ,  $SD_{age} = 8.5$ ) in a committed, heterosexual relationship. The relationship length varied from 3 to 165 months ( $M = 28.9$ ;  $SD = 28.5$ ). In parallel with previous research on mate retention (e.g., Buss et al., 2008), this sample included only individuals in a heterosexual, romantic relationship for at least three months. Participants were recruited from an undergraduate participant pool at a university in the Southeastern US. All procedures were approved by the institutional review board of the university where data were collected.

### 2.2. Materials

#### 2.2.1. Domain-Specific Risk-Taking Scale (DOSPERT; Blais & Weber, 2006)

The DOSPERT is a 30-item inventory assessing risk-taking across five domains: ethical, financial, recreational, health/safety, and social. (see Introduction). Women reported the likelihood that their partner would perform each behavior, using a 7-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 = *Extremely unlikely* to 7 = *Extremely likely*.

There are several other measures of risk-taking (e.g., see Kruger, Wang, & Wilke, 2007), some of which assess domains that are arguably more directly relevant to evolutionary pressures. For example, Kruger et al. (2007) developed an evolutionarily valid domain-specific risk-taking scale that assesses the factors of fertility, between-group competition, within-group competition, mating and resource allocation for mate attraction, and environmental risks. However, some of these items are not applicable to most individuals (e.g., the item “Driving to a rival university at night and stealing the school's flag from the flagpole at the center of campus” is limited to college students) or represent a domain that is also captured by the DOSPERT (e.g., the item “Engaging in unprotected sex during a one-night stand” is captured by the health/safety domain of the DOSPERT, which includes the item “Engaging in unprotected sex”). Therefore, for the current research, we included the DOSPERT as a parsimonious and widely applicable measure of risk-taking that integrates domains from other risk-taking measures.

#### 2.2.2. Mate Retention Inventory-Short Form (MRI-SF; Buss et al., 2008)

The MRI-SF is a 38-item inventory assessing the performance of specific mate retention behaviors organized across two domains: cost-inflicting and benefit provisioning. Women reported how often their partner performed each behavior on a 4-point scale, ranging from 0 = *Never* to 3 = *Often*.

#### 2.2.3. Partner-Directed Insults Scale (PDIS; Goetz, Shackelford, Schipper, & Stewart-Williams, 2006)

The PDIS is a 47-item inventory assessing the frequency with which men said each insult to their partner in the past month. Examples of items are “My partner told me that I am ugly” and “My partner called

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