



## The influence of mate value on women's desire for long and short-term mates: Implicit responses

Murray Millar\*, R. Shane Westfall, Aileen Lovitt

Department of Psychology, University of Nevada, Las Vegas, NV 89154, United States



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### ABSTRACT

This study examined the effects of mate-value on women's implicit desire for long and short-term mates. It was hypothesized that when social desirability effects were minimized that low mate-value women would have more positive associations with men available for short-term relationships compared to high mate-value women. To test this hypothesis, 144 women were presented with men available for either a long or a short-term relationship. The participants were asked to state their explicit response to the men, complete a procedure designed to measure their implicit responses to the men, and a measure of mate-value. As expected, high mate-value women had fewer positive implicit responses to men only available for short-term relations compared to low mate-value women. This effect disappeared when explicit responses were examined.

### 1. Introduction

Mate value is most often conceptualized as observable characteristics that indicate a person's ability to increase or decrease the reproductive success of potential mates (Waynforth, 2001). It is an important individual difference that has a profound impact on the sex differentiated mating strategies employed by men and women. In essence, high mate-value persons are more able to pursue their sex's preferred mating strategy (Edlund & Sagarin, 2010).

Evolutionary researchers have noted that several fundamental biological differences between men and women (e.g., differences in energetic investment in gametes, reproductive capacity, and time to reproduce) have created pressure for sex differentiated mating strategies (e.g., Cashdan, 1993; Gangestad, Simpson, DiGeronimo, & Biek, 1992; Trivers, 1972). These researchers contend that the sex that invests less (men, in the case of humans) will be less selective in mating and will tend to pursue an unrestricted strategy emphasizing short-term relationships. That is, short-term relationships will allow men to have more mating opportunities than long-term relationships. Conversely, the sex that invests more in the offspring (women, in the case of humans) will be more selective in mating and will tend to pursue a more restrictive strategy emphasizing long-term relationships. From an evolutionary perspective, women should invest heavily in each child and if possible induce her mate to contribute his resources. For women long-term relationships allow for more contributions from her mate than short-term relationships.

A large corpus of research has produced evidence consistent with

this proposed sex difference in preferred mating strategy. For example, men have more positive attitudes about short-term relationships (Fisher, 2009; Jackson & Kirkpatrick, 2007; Petersen & Hyde, 2011) and desire more short-term mates than women (see Petersen & Hyde, 2011 for a meta-analysis). In addition, men report having more short-term sexual encounters (Garcia & Reiber, 2008; Sprecher, Treger, & Sakaluk, 2013) and being more willing to mate after a short acquaintance (Schmitt, Shackelford, & Buss, 2001) than women. These sex differences in mating preferences and behavior also appear to be present in many cultures (Buss & Schmitt, 1993; Schmitt, 2005).

Although research has produced strong evidence for overall sex-differentiated tendencies, it is apparent that both men and women will be unable to pursue simultaneously their preferred contradictory strategies. That is, women cannot all have long-term relationships and men all have short-term relationships. In this situation, simply doggedly pursuing your preferred strategy may not be effective because of the resistant responses from the opposite sex (see Buss' (1989) strategic interference theory). Consequently, the extent to which a particular mating strategy is effective will depend on a variety of ecological and contextual contingencies. For example, if women are over represented in the population they become more receptive to short-term relationships because they have fewer mating opportunities (Schmitt, 2005).

#### 1.1. Mate value

In addition to the environmental contingences, mentioned above, it seems very likely that individual differences in mate-value influence a

\* Corresponding author.

E-mail address: [millar@unlv.nevada.edu](mailto:millar@unlv.nevada.edu) (M. Millar).

person's choice of mating strategy. Many researchers have proposed that persons high in mate-value are more able to pursue their preferred mating strategy than persons low in mate-value (e.g., Buss & Schmitt, 1993; Edlund & Sagarin, 2010). For potential mates the worth of high mate-value outweighs the cost of abandoning their preferred strategy. Consequently, high mate-value men are more able to pursue short-term relationships and high mate-value women are more able to pursue long-term relationships. Their potential mates are more likely to forgo their preferred strategy in order to accrue the benefits associated with a high value mate such as access to good genes (Buss & Schmitt, 1993). The reverse is true for low mate-value persons who are less able to entice potential partners to sacrifice their preferred strategy and therefore are more likely to forgo their preferred strategy. Consequently, low mate-value men should be more willing to pursue long-term relationships and low-mate-value women to pursue short-term relationships (e.g. Buss & Schmitt, 1993; Edlund & Sagarin, 2010).

Research has strongly supported the suggestion that high mate-value men pursue more short-term relationships than men low in mate-value. Men who possess traits associated with high mate-value report having more sexual partners than men who have traits associated with less mate-value, e.g., men with high levels of facial attractiveness (Rhodes, Simmons, & Peters, 2005) and social status (Kanazawa, 2003) report having more sexual partners. However, the evidence that lower mate value women pursue more short-term relationships than high mate value women is more equivocal. Consistent with this proposition, a variety of studies have demonstrated that women high in mate value have higher standards for the traits required of both long-term (e.g., Oda, 2001; Tadinac & Hromatko, 2007; Waynforth & Dunbar, 1995) and short-term potential mates (Kenrick, Groth, Trost, & Sadalla, 1993).

Yet surprisingly most studies that have directly tested the proposition have found no relationship between the women's overall mate-value and self-reports of the type of mating strategy employed. For example, numerous studies relying on measures of sociosexuality have found that both low and high mate-value women reported favoring long-term emotionally committed relationships (restricted) over uncommitted short-term encounters (unrestricted) (Gomula, Nowak-Szczepanska, & Danel, 2014). Similarly, Landolt, Lalumière, and Quinsey (1995) reported that both high and low mate-value women report a stronger preference for long-term relations over short-term relationships.

The repeated failure to find a relationship between mate-value and self-reported mating strategy with women has prompted researchers to offer a number of explanations. For example, Gomula et al. (2014) suggested that the very high reproductive cost women endure creates a strong need for her partner's assistance with child care and that this desire overwhelms the effect of mate-value. That is, it is just too costly for women to exclusively pursue a short-term mating strategy. Gangestad and Simpson (2000) propose that women when selecting mates give more attention to environmental variables (e.g., pathogen prevalence) than the mate preferences of men (e.g., the man's desire for high mate-value women). Consequently, a woman's mate-value has less impact on her choice of mating strategies.

It is our contention that the failure to find a mate-value effect with women may have been at least partially due to the type of methodology employed in previous research. Most of these studies employed self-reports that required women to attempt to predict future short-term mating behavior. In most cultures, women who pursue short-term mating strategies are subject to more social sanctions than men who pursue short-term mating (Crawford & Popp, 2003; Jonason & Marks, 2009). There are numerous difficulties in obtaining accurate self-reports of socially undesirable behaviors because, not surprisingly, persons tend to distort their responses to appear socially desirable (see Perinelli and Gremigni (2016) for a review). These problems are particularly acute with queries about sexual behavior. For example, with sexual behavior, even when the researcher guarantees that the participant's information will be completely anonymous participants still

distort their responses (de Jong, Pieters, & Stremersch, 2012). In addition, recent research indicates that women have more apprehension and are more cautious than men about revealing confidential information (Fogel & Nehmad, 2009). Consequently, asking women to reveal past and predict future short-term mating behavior may obscure the effects of low mate-value. That is, low mate-value women may be unwilling to indicate that they are willing to engage in socially undesirable short-term mating behavior. In order to overcome this type of response distortion attitudinal researchers have employed disguised self-reports where participants are unaware that they are giving a report about themselves (Petty, 2018).

### 1.1.1. Current study

The current study revisited the proposition that low mate-value women will be more likely to pursue short-term mating strategies than women high in mate-value utilizing a form of disguised self-report less susceptible to response distortion. Instead of asking for self-reports about mating strategies the present study tapped into implicit preferences and desires that motivate women to engage in different patterns of mating behavior. More specifically, the study measured implicit associations (positive/negative) with potential mates that were available for either long-term or short-term relationships. Although reaction time implicit measures (e.g., implicit associations test) are not invulnerable to response distortion, they are much less susceptible particularly if the person is new to the procedure and has not received instructions on how to distort responses (Fiedler & Bluemke, 2005; Kim, 2003; Stevens, 2004). Overall, implicit association measures are less influenced by social desirability effects than self-reports and thus are more likely to be related to actual mating behavior (De Houwer, 2006; De Houwer & Moors, 2007; Strack & Deutsch, 2004). It was our expectation that when social desirability effects were minimized the moderating effects of mate-value would emerge. That is, that low mate-value women would have more positive associations with mates available for short-term relationships than high mate-value women, and both low and high mate value women would have positive association with mates available for long-term relationships.

## 2. Methods

### 2.1. Participants

Participants were 144 women recruited from a large urban university in the southwestern United States. A power analysis indicated that to have an 80% probability of detecting a true effect in multiple regression  $R^2$  increase analysis (the main analysis used in the current study) at least 78 participants would be required. Participation in the study was limited to persons indicating that they were heterosexuals and over 18 years of age. The average age of the participants was 19 and the range of ages was 18 years to 41 years of age. Forty-three percent of the participants were of European descent, 25% were of Hispanic descent, 12% were of Asian descent, 11% were of African descent, and 9% were from other groups. Forty-one percent of the sample indicated they were not in any type of romantic relationship and 3% indicated they had children. Three participants failed to complete the experimental protocol and were not included in the sample.

### 2.2. Procedure

At the beginning of the study, the experimenter informed the participant that the purpose of the study was to assess how a person forms impressions and that they would be required to read information about another person and then evaluate that person. The participant was reassured that her responses would be completely confidential and seated at a personal computer, which presented the experimental materials.

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