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## Affective implications of the mating/parenting trade-off: Short-term mating motives and desirability as a short-term mate predict less intense tenderness responses to infants



Alec T. Beall\*, Mark Schaller

University of British Columbia, Canada

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### ABSTRACT

Drawing on life-history theory, it is predicted that individuals' attitudinal orientation toward unrestricted short-term mating behavior, as well as their ability to engage in such behavior, are inversely related to nurturant emotional responses (tenderness) to infants. To test these hypotheses, participants ( $N = 305$ ) completed measures assessing individual differences in short-term mating orientation, self-perceived physical attractiveness, dispositional tendency to experience tenderness, and their affective responses to photographs of human infants. Results revealed that (when controlling for other relevant individual difference variables) men's short-term mating orientation and self-perceived attractiveness were inversely associated with dispositional tenderness. Also, among men only, short-term mating orientation and self-perceived attractiveness predicted less intense tenderness responses to infants.

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### 1. Introduction

Human reproductive fitness depends not only on adults' capacity to produce offspring, but also on their capacity to provide protection and care to those offspring. Emotional responses to infants play an important role in motivating these nurturant behaviors. McDougall (1908, p. 66) identified this characteristic affective response as "the tender emotion." An emerging body of literature now empirically differentiates tenderness from other, superficially similar affective states (such as empathy, sympathy, and love; Kalawski, 2010). It will therefore be useful to document more fully the various causes, consequences, and correlates of tenderness.

If the emotional experience of tenderness evolved to facilitate parental care for offspring, then the most obvious correlates are psychological attitudes and aptitudes that define parent/child relationships. Less obviously, tenderness responses may also be predicted by attitudes and aptitudes that define relationships between adults. In this article, we focus on short-term mating relationships. We report results showing that individuals' desire to engage in short-term sexual relations, and their ability to successfully attract short-term sexual partners, both independently

predict the extent to which they experience a tenderness response to infants.

### 2. Mating attitudes and aptitudes as predictors of tenderness

Within the context of close relationships, there is a distinction between dispositions regarding long-term and short-term mating relationships. *Long-term mating orientation* is characterized by the extent to which individuals desire the commitment of an enduring long-term relationship such as marriage. *Short-term mating orientation* is characterized by the extent to which individuals desire casual sexual relationships. Long-term and short-term mating orientation are conceptually distinct constructs, can be measured separately, and have empirically distinct implications (Jackson & Kirkpatrick, 2007).

Given that long-term mating relationships have historically functioned to facilitate biparental care for offspring, it follows that individuals with a stronger long-term mating orientation will have more positive attitudes regarding parenting, which is likely to manifest in a stronger tenderness response to infants. But what about short-term mating orientation? One conceptual approach to this question—based on life history theory—predicts that (even when controlling for long-term mating orientation) short-term mating orientation and tenderness are *negatively* related.

Life history theory draws upon principles of evolutionary biology and developmental plasticity to yield predictions about the

\* Corresponding author. Address: Department of Psychology, University of British Columbia, 2136 West Mall, Vancouver, B.C. V6T 1Z4, Canada. Tel.: +1 (604) 822 2755; fax: +1 (604) 822 6923.

E-mail address: [alec@psych.ubc.ca](mailto:alec@psych.ubc.ca) (A.T. Beall).

timing, duration, and frequency of developmental events, and about behavioral patterns that unfold throughout organisms' lives (Kaplan & Gangestad, 2005). Central to life history theory is the concept of *trade-offs*. One fundamental trade-off is between mating and parenting (Gangestad & Simpson, 2000): To the extent that bioenergetic resources are devoted to physiological systems involving the production of new offspring, those resources cannot be devoted to physiological systems involving the provision of care to existing offspring, and vice-versa. In addition to many implications for between-species differences, this trade-off between mating effort and parenting effort also has important implications for within-species differences. Some of these differences reflect adaptive responses to developmental milestones. For species that produce relatively few offspring (such as humans), the actual production of offspring triggers a predictable change in the manner in which the mating/parenting trade-off is resolved, with relatively more resources allocated to physiological systems facilitating parental care and fewer resources allocated to mating effort. This developmental change is evident in actual behavior (i.e., more caregiving behavior and less mating behavior) and also in hormonal changes—among both mothers and fathers—following the birth of a child (Gray, Kahlenberg, Barrett, Lipson, & Ellison, 2002; Kuzawa, Gettler, Huang, & McDade, 2010). The mating/parenting trade-off may also be resolved differently for the different sexes. In species characterized by differences in obligatory parental investment, the sex with greater obligatory investment (e.g., gestation) is characterized by relatively greater allocation of resources to parental care, and fewer resources allocated to mating effort. In humans, this manifests in a variety of sex differences (Geary, 1998)—including differences in short-term mating orientation (generally higher among men; Simpson & Gangestad, 1991), and in dispositional tendencies toward caregiving (generally higher among women; Taniguchi, 2006).

The implications of this fundamental trade-off are not limited just to these categorical differences between parents and nonparents and between men and women. If indeed the development (or maintenance or deployment) of physiological systems devoted to mating effort occurs at the expense of the development (or maintenance or deployment) of physiological systems devoted to parental care, this implies a more general tendency for approach-oriented attitudes toward mating and care-giving responses to infants to be mutually inhibitory (Apicella & Marlowe, 2007). If so, then (even when controlling for differences in long-term mating orientation, sex, and parenthood) short-term mating orientation may be *inversely* correlated with tenderness responses to infants.

The preceding analysis focused specifically on individuals' mating *attitudes*—dispositional desires regarding short-term sexual relationships. But, just as individuals may differ in their mating attitudes, they also differ in their mating *aptitudes*—ability to actually succeed in attracting mates. In the context of short-term mating, individuals' attitudes may be largely independent of their aptitudes—which depend substantially on superficial appearances. When deciding whether or not to enter into a short-term mating relationship, both men and women place a relatively high priority on the physical attractiveness of any potential short-term mate. Therefore, regardless of their *attitude* toward short-term mating, individuals who are more physically attractive have greater *aptitude* to actually engage successfully in a short-term mating strategy.

Self-perceived attractiveness can be thought of as an indication of an individual's anticipated success in the mating game. And, because people are more likely to engage in behaviors that they expect to produce successful outcomes, it may also serve as an additional indication of their inclination to devote energetic resources to short-term mating behavior. Given the bioenergetic trade-off between mating effort and parenting effort, the functional logic of life history theory therefore implies a second

hypothesis that conceptually parallels the hypothesis linking short-term mating orientation to tenderness: Self-perceived physical attractiveness may be inversely correlated with tenderness responses to infants.

Although recent research has applied the principles of life history theory to the prediction of human individual differences (e.g., Ellis, 2004; Figueredo et al., 2005), no prior empirical research directly tests either of these two hypotheses. There is some evidence that physically attractive individuals may be less empathic (Holtzman, Augustine, & Senne, 2011), but it is unknown whether this relationship extends also to the conceptually distinct emotion of parental tenderness. Similarly, while Apicella and Marlowe (2007) found some evidence that fathers' self-perceived mate value is negatively correlated with investment of effort and attention to their children, that study focused only on fathers (no results were reported for men and women more generally), and did not include measures of tenderness or other emotional responses. Nor has any prior research examined the hypothesized linkages between short-term (or long-term) mating orientation and the emotional experience of tenderness.

### 3. Overview of the study

Our study was designed to test both the hypothesized negative correlation between short-term mating orientation and tenderness towards infants, and the hypothesized negative correlation between self-perceived attractiveness and tenderness.

We assessed tenderness in two ways. Chronic dispositional tendency to experience tenderness was assessed with a 15-item self-report inventory modeled after other measures that assess individual differences in other specific emotional states (e.g., disgust sensitivity; Haidt, McCauley, & Rozin, 1994). In addition to assessing this chronic dispositional tendency ("trait" tenderness) we also assessed individual's temporary affective response to relevant perceptual stimuli: We presented individuals with photographs depicting babies, and measured emotional responses ("state" tenderness).

In order to provide a rigorous test of the first hypothesis, we assessed both short-term mating orientation (STMO) and long-term mating orientation (LTMO). Because LTMO tends to be negatively correlated with STMO, and because it is likely to be positively correlated with tenderness, we statistically controlled for LTMO in order to test for any unique relation between STMO and tenderness.

Analogously, when testing the second hypothesis, we assessed not only the extent to which individuals perceived themselves to possess traits that made them attractive to short-term mates, we also assessed the extent to which they perceived themselves to possess additional traits that connote their likelihood of being a good long-term romantic partner. These self-perceptions are likely to be positively correlated with tenderness, and also positively correlated with self-perceived physical attractiveness (because of individual difference in self-evaluation more broadly). Consequently, we statistically controlled for these additional self-perceptions in order to test the unique relation between self-perceived physical attractiveness and tenderness.

We also assessed, and statistically controlled for, demographic variables (such as sex and parenthood) that might otherwise produce spurious correlations between the variables of focal interest.

## 4. Method

### 4.1. Participants

Participants were 305 residents of the United States (164 men, 141 women; 109 parents, 196 non-parents; *M* age = 31.49 years

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