



Men's mate retention varies with men's personality and their partner's personality



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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 27 April 2013

Received in revised form 2 August 2013

Accepted 17 August 2013

Available online 13 September 2013

Keywords:

Mate retention

Sexual infidelity

Personality

Big five

Evolutionary psychology

ABSTRACT

Mate retention is the recurrent adaptive problem of retaining a mate in a relationship. Humans may have evolved mechanisms which motivate behavior in response to this problem. We examined the relationship between men's mate retention and men's and their partner's personality in studies of 467 men and 565 women in committed relationships. Participants reported on their own or their partner's mate retention and both their own and their partner's personality. Results indicate a negative relationship between men's Emotional Stability and men's mate retention and a positive relationship between men's Agreeableness and men's benefit-provisioning mate retention. Discussion addresses limitations and directions for future research addressing the links between personality and mate retention.

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1. Introduction

Humans have recurrently faced over evolutionary history the adaptive problem of mate retention—that is, retaining a mate in a committed relationship (Buss, 1988; Buss & Shackelford, 1997a). Because mate retention has been a recurrent adaptive problem, humans are expected to have evolved psychological mechanisms motivating behavior in response.

Researchers have identified several correlates of mate retention behavior. For example, researchers have documented sex differences in the performance of certain types of mate retention (e.g., women more than men engage in appearance enhancement, whereas men more than women engage in resource display; Buss & Shackelford, 1997a). Several studies have investigated phenomena including physical violence (Kaighobadi, Starratt, Shackelford, & Popp, 2008; Shackelford, Goetz, Buss, Euler, & Hoier, 2005) and partner-directed insults (McKibbin et al., 2007), and the roles these behaviors play in mate retention. Other research has shown that men's mate retention varies with the risk of their partner's infidelity (Starratt, Shackelford, Goetz, & McKibbin, 2007).

Mate retention behavior is stable over time (Kaighobadi, Shackelford, & Buss, 2010). In addition, mate retention varies with stable characteristics of men (Goetz et al., 2005). This suggests that mate retention may be linked to other stable dimensions, such as personality. de Miguel and Buss (2011) found that two personality dimensions are associated with mate retention: Neuroticism and Agreeableness. They argued that because Neuroticism reflects sensitivity to social exclusion, those high in Neuroticism are particularly vigilant against the social danger of losing their mate. de Miguel and Buss argued that the relationships between Agreeableness and mate retention reflect the fact that Agreeableness signals cooperativeness rather than aggressiveness, motivating less frequent use of negative, cost-inflicting mate retention behaviors and more frequent use of positive, benefit-provisioning mate retention behaviors. In addition, de Miguel and Buss found that Conscientiousness is positively related to some types of mate retention, specifically resource display and appearance enhancement. They explained this by noting that Conscientiousness is associated with long-term resource acquisition and hierarchy negotiation, both of which are associated with an ability to successfully use benefit-provisioning mate retention behaviors.

Mate retention behavior is typically measured using the Mate Retention Inventory (MRI; Buss, 1988), which assesses mate retention behavior across five broad categories. Direct Guarding includes acts to keep one's partner under watch (e.g., "He insisted that she spend all her free time with him."). Intersexual Negative

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Inducements includes behaviors which manipulate or threaten one's partner into remaining faithful (e.g., "She became jealous when he went out without her."). Intrasexual Negative Inducements includes conceptually similar acts of threat or manipulation, but directed toward potential rivals (e.g., "He yelled at the other guys who looked at her."). Positive Inducements includes acts such as providing sexual favors, material gifts, and displaying signs of affection (e.g., "He went out of his way to be kind, nice, and caring."). Public Signals of Possession includes behaviors intended to signal of "possession" of a partner (e.g., "She bragged about him to other guys."). These categories of mate retention can be characterized as *cost-inflicting* (Intrasexual Negative Inducements, Intersexual Negative Inducements, and Direct Guarding) or *benefit-provisioning* (Positive Inducements and Public Signals of Possession; Miner, Starratt, & Shackelford, 2009).

We build upon the research of de Miguel and Buss (2011), using the MRI. We examined the relationship between personality and mate retention behaviors. We extend their research by collecting information about the personality of both partners, rather than only the participant. We also contrast the links of personality dimensions with cost-inflicting versus benefit-provisioning mate retention behavior. In two independent studies of men and women, respectively, we tested the following hypotheses, derived in part from de Miguel and Buss:

Hypothesis 1. Men and women's Emotional Stability will be negatively related to men's cost-inflicting mate retention behaviors and men's benefit-provisioning mate retention behaviors.

Hypothesis 2. Men and women's Conscientiousness will be negatively related to men's cost-inflicting mate retention behaviors and positively related to men's benefit-provisioning mate retention behaviors.

Hypothesis 3. Men and women's Agreeableness will be negatively related to men's cost-inflicting mate retention behaviors and positively related to men's benefit-provisioning mate retention behaviors.

We did not predict relationships between men's or women's Surgency or Openness and men's mate retention behaviors.

2. Study 1: Methods

2.1. Participants

467 men in a committed, sexual relationship with a woman participated. The mean age of the participants was 24.2 years ($SD = 7.9$), the mean age of the participants' partners was 23.0 years ($SD = 7.3$), and the mean relationship length was 37.1 months ($SD = 59.7$). Participants were drawn from several US universities. Because of the sensitive nature of some of the questions, no further demographic data were secured.

2.2. Materials and procedure

Men completed an online questionnaire that solicited information on their age, their partner's age, and the duration of their relationship. After completing the demographic questions, participants completed the MRI to assess performance of their own mate retention. Following Buss (1988; and see Shackelford et al., 2005), we grouped responses into five categories of mate retention behaviors (see Section 1 for categories and sample acts). For each item, participants indicated how often they performed the behavior in the past month, ranging from 0 = *Never* to 3 = *Often*. Following Miner et al. (2009), mate retention categories were further organized into groups of cost-inflicting behaviors and benefit-provisioning behaviors. Previous research has established the reliability, validity, and utility of the MRI as an assessment of mate retention behaviors

(Buss & Shackelford, 1997a; Shackelford et al., 2005; Shackelford, Goetz, Buss, Euler et al., 2005).

Participants also completed assessments of their own and their partner's standings on five major dimensions of personality using a 40-item instrument (Botwin, Buss, & Shackelford, 1997). For each item, participants were given an adjective pair with the numbers 1 through 7 displayed between the two anchors (e.g., independent-conforming). Participants indicated the number that best describes them along each adjective pair and the number that best described their partner along each adjective pair. Following Botwin et al., we grouped responses to capture the five major dimensions of personality: Surgency (e.g., "independent", "talkative"), Agreeableness (e.g., "warm", "flexible"), Conscientiousness (e.g., "reliable", "hardworking"), Emotional Stability (e.g., "relaxed", "even-tempered"), and Openness (e.g., "knowledgeable", "curious"). Previous research has established the reliability, validity, and utility of this measure as an assessment of standings on the five major dimensions of personality (Botwin et al., 1997; Buss & Shackelford, 1997b; Goetz et al., 2005).

3. Study 1: Results

Following Shackelford, Goetz, and Buss (2005), we standardized mate retention scores and averaged the standardized scores to calculate values for the five categories of mate retention. Cronbach's alpha reliabilities for the five categories—Direct Guarding, Intersexual Negative Inducements, Positive Inducements, Public Signals of Possession, and Intrasexual Negative Inducements—were .83, .84, .81, .73, and .74, respectively. We calculated scores for the two major dimensions of mate retention by summing the category values for the constituent mate retention categories following Miner et al. (2009). Alpha reliabilities for the two dimensions—cost-inflicting and benefit-provisioning—were .87 and .85, respectively. Following Botwin et al. (1997), we calculated scores for men's reports of their own personality and their partner's personality by first reverse-scoring relevant items and then averaging responses for each of the five dimensions of personality. Alpha reliabilities for the five personality dimensions—Surgency, Agreeableness, Conscientiousness, Emotional Stability, and Openness—were .61, .65, .64, .52, and .52, respectively, for men's personality and .57, .64, .60, .53, and .60, for women's personality. The reliabilities are moderate in size, and may reflect the small number of items used to construct each personality dimension score.

3.1. Correlational analyses

Because of the potential for alpha inflation, we set a more stringent criterion of $\alpha = .01$ for interpretation of analyses. We calculated correlations using men's reports of their own personality and their partner's personality and men's reports of their own mate retention behaviors (see Table 1). Men's reports of their own use of cost-inflicting mate retention behaviors correlated negatively with their reports of their own Agreeableness, their own Emotional Stability, and their partner's Openness. Men's reports of their own use of benefit-provisioning mate retention behaviors correlated positively with their own Agreeableness and their own Openness, and positively with their partner's Conscientiousness.

3.2. Multiple regression analyses

Across-sex correlations between men's self-reported personality scores and men's reports of their partner's personality scores for the five personality dimensions averaged $r = .26$ (all $ps < .001$, see Table 2). Correlations among men's ratings of their own personality dimensions averaged .20, with correlations among men's

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