

# Control tactics and partner violence in heterosexual relationships

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## Abstract

This study investigated sex-specific predictors of violent and nonviolent mate guarding used by men ( $n=399$ ) and women ( $n=951$ ) in heterosexual relationships, using both self-reports and reports on partners. We found, contrary to some previous evolutionary assumptions, that men and women showed similar degrees of controlling behavior, and that this predicted physical aggression to partners in both sexes. We also predicted from evolutionarily based studies that men's and women's control and aggression would vary as a function of female fecundity and mate value (relative to peer group and to partner). Fecundity was associated with men's and women's controlling behavior, but not their physical aggression: relationships where the woman was fecund showed higher rates of control. According to partners' reports, men and women who had lower mate values showed more controlling behavior and (to a lesser extent) more physical aggression. There was no support for the prediction that higher mate-value partners would be guarded more than lower mate-value ones. The following limitations are discussed: the sample and method of data collection, and the lack of information on the women's hormonal status.

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## 1. Introduction

### *1.1. Mate guarding, control and physical aggression in relationships*

Most applications of evolutionary theory to partner violence view it as an extension of mate guarding, which is widespread in nonhuman animals (Parker, 1974). In species that have internal fertilisation and require paternal investment, paternity certainty will be increased by mate guarding. This logic has been applied to men's violence to their partners by Wilson and Daly (1992, 1993, 1996), who have linked negative forms of mate guarding, for example directly seeking to control a partner's behavior, to physical aggression by men to their partners. Underlying this behavior is a proprietary male mindset, whose function is to maximise paternity certainty. While its evolutionary logic is sound, the same authors have also combined with two others, who have argued that partner violence is largely male to female (Dobash, Dobash, Wilson, & Daly, 1992), a

view typically associated with the patriarchal explanation of partner violence (Dobash & Dobash, 1977–78, 1980, 1998). This view runs counter to a considerable body of evidence from industrialized Western nations (Archer, 2000, 2002, 2006; Dutton, 2006; Felson, 2002), indicating that both sexes contribute to partner violence.

While it is clear that for a man to maximise his reproductive potential he needs to invest only in his own biological offspring and hence avoid being cuckolded, it is also the case that for a woman to maximise her fitness she needs to secure adequate provisions for herself and her offspring, which usually means monopolising the father's resources. Indeed, it is clear that both men and women show sexual jealousy (e.g., Felson, 2002; Mullen & Martin, 1994; White, 1981), which follows if both sexes have reasons to guard their mates. Buss (1988) took a wider view of mate guarding, in the form of “mate retention tactics”, a term that included both attempted control and the use of force, and positive inducements, such as making oneself more appealing to the mate, providing gifts and conspicuous displays of resources. Most of the tactics reported by American couples were of this type, although a minority involved threats, spreading rumors, or violence to a rival or the mate (Buss, 1988; Buss & Shackelford, 1997). Flinn (1988) also studied

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mate guarding in both sexes, in his study of mate guarding in a Caribbean village.

In the present study, we consider negative forms of mate guarding, controlling behavior and physical aggression, in both sexes. Since the view that much of men's partner violence can be explained by paternity uncertainty is prevalent in evolutionary thinking (e.g., Figueredo et al., 2001; Peters, Shackelford, & Buss, 2002; Shackelford, Goetz, Buss, Euler, & Hoier, 2005; Wilson & Daly, 1992, 1993, 1996), we first assessed whether controlling behavior is displayed more by men than by women, as would be predicted if paternity uncertainty were the dominant cause of partner violence (Hypothesis 1). We then considered whether activities that involve controlling the partner's behavior are related to physical aggression in males but not in females (Hypothesis 2), which again would be predicted if paternity uncertainty were the main cause of partner violence.

Continual mate guarding would be extremely time consuming and seriously impede the guarder's ability to engage in other important activities, such as acquiring food. Therefore one would expect humans to have evolved sensitivity to cues indicating when a mate needs more or less frequent guarding (Buss, 1988). Such cues may be external to the relationship, such as the presence of rivals, or from within, such as women's fecundity, and men's and women's mate value and genetic capital. We now elaborate on two of these cues to be investigated here.

### 1.2. Women's reproductive value and fecundity

Men can only be cuckolded when their partner is fecund and therefore we would expect cues to female fecundity to affect men's and women's mate-guarding behavior. Men who prevent their fertile partners having extra-pair copulations eliminate the chance of being cuckolded. A woman's reproductive value declines from young adulthood into middle age (Fisher, 1930; Wilson & Daly, 1993). Therefore, researchers have used women's age as a proxy measure for reproductive value and have generally found that this is associated with more mate retention tactics (Buss & Shackelford, 1997) and more spousal violence (Figueredo & McCloskey, 1993; Peters et al., 2002; Shackelford, Buss, & Peters, 2000; Wilson & Daly, 1993) being directed to her, although Figueredo et al. (2001) found no association between a women's age and her partner's aggression.

Fecundity varies not only with age but also with pregnancy and lactation, and the time since the birth of the last child, since a lapse of several years signals reduced fertility where no contraceptives are used (Flinn, 1988). Therefore, in studying whether a women's fecundity affects inter-pair conflict and aggression in a Caribbean village, Flinn (1988) operationalized fecundity in terms of the woman being under 40 years old, and either having no children or having children over 12 but under 48 months; the alternative category ("infecund") consisted of women who

were pregnant or had an infant under 12 months old or were over 40 years of age. Flinn found that men spent more time interacting with, and showed more aggressive behavior toward, fecund than "infecund" partners. From this study, we derived Hypothesis 3, that men with fecund partners will use more direct mate-guarding behavior than will men with nonfecund partners.

There is less evidence on how a woman's fecundity might influence her own mate-guarding behavior. Although Flinn (1988) found no difference between fecund and nonfecund women's aggression towards their partners, Buss and Shackelford (1997) did find a weak but significant negative association between a wife's mate retention tactics and her age, suggesting that more fecund women guarded more than less fecund women. From this, we derived the tentative Hypothesis 4, that fecund women will use more mate guarding tactics than women who are not fecund.

### 1.3. Mate value

Symons (1995) defined mate value as "the degree to which each [mate] would promote the reproductive success of [the other] who mated with them" (p. 87). It comprises many different facets, such as physical attractiveness, personality and resources. Although these differ in their importance for men and women (Buss, 1989), the sexes seek mates that are in many ways similar to themselves (e.g., Botwin, Buss, & Shackelford, 1997). Figueredo and McCloskey (1993) reasoned that violence is not a preferred mate-guarding strategy, but is more likely to be used by "competitively disadvantaged males", men who are low in mate value, who are less physically attractive, less socially competent, less sexually adequate and/or financially poorer than their potential rivals. Figueredo et al. (2001) suggested that, unlike competitively disadvantaged women, who could engage in short-term mating with higher quality men, such an option is not available to competitively disadvantaged men, as women gain nothing from copulating with them. Such men will therefore be at the greatest risk of cuckoldry and hence need to use more frequent mate guarding behavior. This reasoning leads to Hypothesis 5, that men (but not women) with lower mate value will use more direct, aggressive, forms of mate-guarding behavior than those with higher mate value.

A further possibility concerns the mate value of the partner. The higher this is, the more attention they will attract from other potential mates. There is evidence that this may be the case for women: Haselton and Gangestad (2006) found that more attractive women were mate guarded more than less attractive women, based on daily reports. The present prediction is that members of both sexes who perceive their partners to have higher absolute mate value will use more mate guarding (Hypothesis 6). Finally, we investigated the possibility that the sexes differed in the characteristics of their partners that were more associated with mate guarding, men guarding more

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