

# The structure and measurement of human mating strategies: toward a multidimensional model of sociosexuality

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Initial receipt 7 November 2005; final revision received 18 April 2007

## Abstract

Recent theoretical perspectives concerning the structure of variation in human mating have focused less on conceptualizations of alternate mating strategies and more on the evolution of a conditional strategy. Empirical evidence suggests that this conditional strategy may involve the simultaneous pursuit of long-term and short-term mating tactics. Despite these developments, empirical measurement has proceeded using the *Sociosexual Orientation Inventory* (SOI), which measures restricted and unrestricted mating orientations along a single bipolar continuum. To fully capture the pluralistic nature of human mating, we suggest that a multidimensional empirical measure is required. To test our hypothesis, we subjected an expanded version of the SOI, which included items measuring psychological orientation toward short-term mating and long-term mating, to principal components analysis. A three-factor structure representing short-term mating orientation, long-term mating orientation, and previous sexual behavior emerged. In subsequent analyses, we demonstrate that our newly developed long-term and short-term dimensions (a) are largely independent and (b) correlate differentially with other theoretically relevant variables.

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**Keywords:** Mating strategies; Reproductive strategies; Sociosexuality; SOI; Measurement

## 1. Introduction

The current study focuses on the theoretical structure and empirical measurement of human mating strategies, particularly on the strategic dimension of sociosexuality (Gangestad & Simpson, 1990; Simpson & Gangestad, 1991). *Sociosexuality* refers to individual differences in willingness to engage in sexual relations without closeness or commitment; its existing measure, the *Sociosexual Orientation Inventory* (SOI), has become the leading measure of individual differences in mating. We argue that despite its widespread use, the SOI is a potentially limited measure of both between-sex and within-sex variation in mating orientation.

### 1.1. The SOI: a measure of sociosexual variation and human mating strategies

The SOI (Simpson & Gangestad, 1991) measures sociosexual orientation (or willingness to engage in uncommitted sex) along a single bipolar continuum. *Restricted* individuals require greater closeness and commitment prior to having sex with a romantic partner, whereas *unrestricted* individuals are comfortable with engaging in casual sex. The SOI has become the leading measure of variation in human mating strategies (e.g., Bailey, Gaulin, Agyei, & Gladue, 1994; Barber, 1998; Hoier, 2003; Salmon, 2003) and has most frequently been conceptualized and used as a single dimension assessing individual differences in long-term versus short-term mating (e.g., Brase & Walker, 2004; Buss, 1999; Clark, 2004; Greiling & Buss, 2000; Hirsch & Paul, 1996; Kirkpatrick, 1998; Klusmann, 2002; Mikach & Bailey, 1999; Schmitt, Shackelford, Duntley, Tooke, & Buss, 2001; but for examples of empirical studies that used the SOI strictly as a measure of short-term mating strategy, see Michalski and Shackelford, 2002; Wiederman & Dubois,

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1998). Nonetheless, we believe that recent theoretical perspectives and empirical data challenge the validity of the SOI as a measure of variation in mating strategy.

### 1.2. Are mating strategies better measured and conceptualized as multidimensional?

Given recent theoretical and empirical research in the area of human mating, we believe that a multidimensional measure might more fully capture variation in mating strategies. We believe that two distinct sets of modifications to the SOI are required.

#### 1.2.1. Sociosexual attitudes and behaviors

The SOI is an aggregate of sociosexual attitudes (attitudes in favor of casual sex) and sociosexual behaviors (number of previous sexual partners). As argued by Bailey et al. (1994), it is potentially useful to analyze sociosexual attitudes separate from sociosexual behaviors, as it is possible to examine the level (psychological or behavioral) upon which contextual constraints act to create variation in mating strategy. Mating strategies are integrated sets of psychological adaptations and their behavioral manifestations (Buss & Schmitt, 1993). Of these two components, behavioral manifestations are thought to be uniquely susceptible to opportunities and constraints that exist in the environment (Symons, 1989; Tooby & Cosmides, 1990).

These considerations led Bailey et al. (1994) to develop a variety of new scales, as alternatives to the SOI, to assess sociosexual attitudes and preferences independently of sexual behavior in their own research. In one set of analyses, they divided the original SOI into separate subscales to assess attitudes and behaviors separately, and demonstrated that two groups (homosexual men and heterosexual men) differed significantly with respect to one (behavior) but not the other (attitude) subscale. They interpreted this finding as supporting their “hypothesis that heterosexual and homosexual men differ in their *opportunities*, but not in the *intensity of motivation*, to engage in casual sex” (Bailey et al., 1994, p. 1086; italics added). Because opportunities represent just one of many factors (beyond attitudes or preferences) that influence actual behavior, it seems important to differentiate attitudes from behavior in both conceptualization and measurement.

#### 1.2.2. Restricted and unrestricted sociosexual attitudes

Evolutionary theories of mating are essentially unanimous on the point that human sexual psychology is pluralistic, and that male and female evolved psychology includes the capacity for implementing both long-term and short-term mating tactics (e.g., Buss & Schmitt, 1993; Gangestad & Simpson, 2000). However, the prevailing measure of human sexual strategies, the SOI, measures only a single dimension. If the unidimensional SOI is taken to index interest in or motivation toward uncommitted sex (ranging from low to high, or from *restricted* to *unrestricted*)

as implied by its authors, then motivation toward long-term mating is ignored. This may be adequate for many purposes, but, in general, suggests that the field lacks a comprehensive measure of mating orientation. On the other hand, the use of the SOI as a measure of long-term *versus* short-term mating entails a crucial but unexamined assumption that these orientations are mutually exclusive opposite poles of a single bipolar continuum.

Simpson and Gangestad (1991) demonstrated that sex accounts for a substantial amount of variation in sociosexuality, with males being more likely to possess an unrestricted sociosexual orientation than females. Therefore, researchers using the SOI as a measure of long-term versus short-term mating might be led to conclude that males are primarily interested in short-term mating and females are primarily interested in long-term mating. Empirical studies designed to test sexual strategies theory challenge this conceptualization. For instance, Buss and Schmitt (1993) found that males and females do not differ significantly in their stated pursuit of a long-term mate, yet differ widely in their stated pursuit of short-term sexual partners. Based on these findings, we believe that a two-dimensional model of sociosexual attitudes that distinguishes restricted/long-term attitudes from unrestricted/short-term attitudes would better conceptualize and measure between-sex variation in mating psychology.

Theoretical developments concerning the structure of within-sex variation also have implications for measuring individual differences in mating orientation. For instance, models of alternate mating strategies suggest that individuals favor either long-term mating strategies or short-term mating strategies (e.g., Gangestad & Simpson, 1990). However, models of a conditional mating strategy with mixed mating tactics suggest that there is a degree of psychological and behavioral flexibility within individuals that allows them to sequentially or simultaneously enact both long-term and short-term tactics (e.g., Buss & Schmitt, 1993; Fisher, 1998; Trivers, 1972). Indeed, recent empirical studies on the conditional expression of long-term and short-term mate preferences provide evidence of female mixed mating tactics (e.g., Havlicek, Roberts, & Flegr, 2005; Little, Jones, Penton-Voak, Burt, & Perrett, 2002; Penton-Voak et al., 1999). Therefore, measuring orientation toward only one dimension of mating and developing generalizations of overall strategy are potentially misleading. Again, we believe that a two-dimensional model of sociosexual attitudes would best measure the hypothesized variation within the sexes.

### 1.3. The current study

The purpose of the current study is to develop and validate a multidimensional measure of mating strategy. In Phase 1, we use factor analysis to construct such a measure that distinguishes short-term attitudes, long-term attitudes, and sexual behavior. In Phase 2, we demonstrate the utility of

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