



# Solving the problem of partner infidelity: Individual mate retention, coalitional mate retention, and in-pair copulation frequency



Nicole Barbaro<sup>a,\*</sup>, Michael N. Pham<sup>b</sup>, Todd K. Shackelford<sup>b</sup>

<sup>a</sup> University of Pittsburgh, United States

<sup>b</sup> Oakland University, United States

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## ABSTRACT

Humans deploy various strategies to solve adaptive problems associated with a long-term partner's infidelity. We investigated the relationships among three such strategies: individual mate retention, coalitional mate retention (i.e., mate retention with assistance from allies), and in-pair copulation frequency. Participants ( $n = 387$ ; 176 women) in a committed, heterosexual relationship reported how often they (1) perform individual mate retention, (2) request coalitional mate retention, and (3) had sexual intercourse with their partner. The results indicate that women's individual mate retention and men's coalitional mate retention are positively associated with in-pair copulation frequency. The discussion notes limitations of this research and highlights the diversity of strategies humans deploy to address the adaptive problems of partner infidelity.

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## 1. Introduction

A long-term romantic partner's infidelity inflicts costs on both men and women. Infidelity can increase the risk of contracting sexually transmitted diseases, often produces psychological distress (e.g., depression, anxiety; [Cano & O'Leary, 2000](#)), and is a leading cause of relationship dissolution ([Allen & Atkins, 2012](#)). Given these costs, individuals deploy various strategies to reduce the risk of partner infidelity, including individual mate retention ([Buss, 1988](#); [Buss & Shackelford, 1997](#)), coalitional mate retention (i.e., mate retention with assistance from allies; [Pham, Barbaro, & Shackelford, 2015](#)), and in-pair copulation ([Shackelford, Goetz, Guta, & Schmitt, 2006](#)).

Men and women also incur sex-specific costs from their partner's infidelity. A man whose partner is sexually unfaithful risks cuckoldry—unwitting investment in another man's offspring ([Buss & Shackelford, 1997](#)). A woman whose partner is emotionally unfaithful risks losing partner-provisioned resources should these be diverted to another woman ([Schutzwohl & Koch, 2004](#)). Over evolutionary time, sex-specific costs of partner infidelity have produced sex-differentiated mate retention behaviors that appeal to the mate preferences of the opposite sex ([Buss, 1988](#); [Buss & Shackelford, 1997](#)). For example, men will display resources and

protection, whereas women will focus on increasing their perceived reproductive value ([Buss, 1988](#); [Salkicevic, Stanic, & Grabovac, 2014](#)).

One strategy both sexes use to retain a mate is *individual mate retention*. [Buss \(1988\)](#) developed the Mate Retention Inventory to assess individual mate retention behaviors along 19 tactics, from vigilance about a partner's whereabouts to violence against rivals. Nearly all (102 of 104) items in the Mate Retention Inventory are individual-level behaviors, or behaviors performed alone. There are sex differences in the performance of mate retention tactics. For example, women more than men perform Appearance Enhancement (e.g., making oneself more attractive for one's partner) because men more than women value a partner's attractiveness ([Pfluger, Oberzaucher, Katina, Holzleiner, & Grammer, 2012](#)). Men more than women perform direct violence against rivals, because women more than men value a partner's ability to provide physical protection ([Buss, 1989](#); [Buss & Barnes, 1986](#)).

Individuals also perform mate retention with assistance from allies, or *coalitional mate retention*, as a strategy to reduce the risk of partner infidelity ([Pham et al., 2015](#)). Two items in the Mate Retention Inventory (e.g., "had my friends check up on my partner") suggest that individuals request assistance from others to perform mate retention ([Pham et al., 2015](#); [Stafford & Canary, 1991](#)), and that friends play important roles in relationship maintenance ([Canary & Stafford, 1992](#)). The Coalitional Mate Retention Inventory ([Pham et al., 2015](#)) assesses the occurrence of coalitional mate retention behaviors across seven tactics: *Manipulation* (i.e., an

\* Corresponding author at: University of Pittsburgh, Department of Psychology, 3425 Sennott Square, Pittsburgh, PA 15260, United States.

E-mail address: [barbaro@pitt.edu](mailto:barbaro@pitt.edu) (N. Barbaro).

ally deceives the partner into admitting or demonstrating an interest in infidelity), *Praise* (i.e., an ally says positive things to the partner and to others, thereby increasing the romantic partnership's desirability), *Vigilance* (i.e., an ally watches the partner's behaviors), *Therapy* (i.e., an ally strengthens the romantic partnership by repairing relationship problems and listening to relationship concerns), *Gifts* (i.e., an ally secures information about desired gifts for the partner), *Monopolizing Time* (i.e., an ally spends time with the partner), and *Violence* (i.e., an ally performs violence against potential rivals). Pham et al. found that performance of coalitional mate retention is correlated positively with performance of individual mate retention and, additionally, individuals request different coalitional mate retention tactics from their male friends than from their female friends.

In-pair copulation is a third mate retention strategy. Both men and women use frequent in-pair copulation to increase their partner's sexual satisfaction (Greeley, 1991; Laumann, Gagnon, Michael, & Michaels, 1994), thereby increasing their partner's relationship commitment (Sprecher, 2002). In-pair copulation also may function as Direct Guarding—a set of individual-level mate retention tactics that comprise the Direct Guarding category of the Mate Retention Inventory (Buss, 1988; Buss & Shackelford, 1997; Leivers, Rhodes, & Simmons, 2014). During in-pair copulation, individuals monopolize their partner's time, conceal their partner, and are vigilant of their partner's whereabouts. For men, frequent in-pair copulation also functions as a sperm competition tactic. Sperm competition occurs when a female copulates with two or more males within a sufficiently brief time period, resulting in sperm of different males concurrently occupying her reproductive tract and competing to fertilize ova (Shackelford & LeBlanc, 2001; Shackelford, Pound, & Goetz, 2005). Men engage in frequent in-pair copulation to increase the population of viable sperm in their partner's reproductive tract, to thereby increase the likelihood that their sperm, and not a rival's sperm, fertilizes ova (Baker & Bellis, 1993; Pham et al., 2014; Shackelford & Goetz, 2006; Simmons, Firman, Rhodes, & Peters, 2004).

There is limited research addressing the relationships between individual mate retention, coalitional mate retention, and frequent in-pair copulation. For men, frequent in-pair copulation and individual mate retention behaviors are positively correlated (Shackelford et al., 2006), and men's and women's coalitional mate retention behaviors and individual mate retention behaviors are positively correlated (Pham et al., 2015). Both studies suggest that individuals might use several mate retention strategies *concurrently* to solve the adaptive problems associated with a partner's infidelity. However, research has not yet investigated (1) the relationship between frequent in-pair copulation and individual mate retention behaviors in women, and (2) the relationship between coalitional mate retention behaviors and frequent in-pair copulation for either sex.

## 2. The current research

The current research investigates the relationships among three mate retention strategies—individual mate retention, coalitional mate retention, and frequent in-pair copulation—to identify whether these strategies are used concurrently to solve the adaptive problems associated with partner infidelity. We extend the findings of Shackelford and Goetz (2006) to a female sample, and hypothesize that women who more frequently perform individual mate retention tactics also will perform more frequent in-pair copulation (Hypothesis 1). Because women more than men deploy the mate retention tactics of Appearance Enhancement, Sexual Inducements (e.g., “performed sexual favors to keep my partner around”), and Jealousy Induction (e.g., “talked to another woman [man] at a party to make my partner jealous”) (Buss, 1988; Buss

& Shackelford, 1997), we hypothesize that women's use of these tactics, in particular, will correlate positively with their performance of frequent in-pair copulation. For reportorial completeness, we also computed correlations between in-pair copulation frequency and the remaining 16 individual mate retention tactics.

Concurrent use of coalitional mate retention and frequent in-pair copulation has not yet been investigated, although research demonstrates that individuals use several strategies concurrently to address partner infidelity (Pham et al., 2015; Shackelford et al., 2006). Because research has documented sex differences in requests for coalitional mate retention (Pham et al., 2015), we generated separate hypotheses for men and women. We hypothesize that men (Hypothesis 2) and women (Hypothesis 3) who more frequently request coalitional mate retention tactics also will perform more frequent in-pair copulation. Because individuals who perform in-pair copulations necessarily also perform Direct Guarding behaviors (i.e., Monopolization of Time, Concealment of Mate, and Vigilance tactics; Buss, 1988; Buss & Shackelford, 1997), we control statistically for the performance of Direct Guarding behaviors to rule out the possibility that in-pair copulation is merely another Direct Guarding behavior (see Leivers et al., 2014).

## 3. Method

### 3.1. Participants

We used data secured by Pham et al. (2015). We recruited 387 participants (176 women) in a committed, heterosexual relationship lasting at least 1 year via Amazon's Mechanical Turk (MTurk). Participants' mean age was 32.1 years ( $SD = 9.1$ ), and the mean relationship length was 66.0 months ( $SD = 88.5$ ). Participants reported on interactions with two friends (one man and one woman—see below), each of whom they considered a good friend, and each of whom they had known for at least 1 year. The mean length of the friendship was 88.7 months ( $SD = 90.2$ ) with the male friend, and 76.6 months ( $SD = 89.6$ ) with the female friend. We implemented MTurk filters recommended by Peer, Vosgerau, and Acquisti (2013): MTurk participants could access and participate in this study if they had successfully completed 95% of at least 500 accessed MTurk jobs.

### 3.2. Materials

Participants were instructed to think of one heterosexual man and one heterosexual woman, each of whom they considered a good friend and had known for at least 1 year. Participants completed the 44-item initial Coalitional Mate Retention Inventory (Pham et al., 2015) twice (i.e., once for each friend), reporting on a 4-point scale (0 = *never*, 1 = *rarely*, 2 = *sometimes*, 3 = *often*) how often they requested their friend perform each behavior in the past year. Participants completed the Mate Retention Inventory-Short Form (Buss, Shackelford, & McKibbin, 2008), reporting on a 4-point scale (0 = *never*, 1 = *rarely*, 2 = *sometimes*, 3 = *often*) how often they performed 38 individual mate retention behaviors in the past year. Participants also reported how often they have sexual intercourse with their partner during a typical week, as a measure of in-pair copulation frequency.

### 3.3. Procedure

Eligible prospective participants viewed an advertisement for the study on MTurk's job listings. Those interested in and eligible to participate were provided a link to a consent form. Those who electronically signed the consent form could access the survey, and those who did not sign were exited from the study. Participants that completed the study were compensated \$4.00.

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