

Original Article

Strategic reactions to unfaithfulness: female self-presentation in the context of mate attraction is linked to uncertainty of paternity

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Abstract

People are motivated to self-present to their potential romantic partners. We hypothesized that due to the uncertainty of paternity, one of the self-presentational behaviors that human females engage in when they are motivated to attract a long-term mate is designed to communicate to prospective partners that they are likely to be faithful. In Study 1, we show that females in a long-term-romance mindset are less likely to agree to going to a concert with another female known to be unfaithful (cheater) than with a female known to have many sexual partners (player) or a non-flirtatious control female (control). Females in the long-term-romance mindset are also less willing to be the unfaithful female's friend and less willing to indicate that she is similar to them. In Study 2, we show that the effect is gender specific. In particular, we show that in the presence of a potential long-term partner, females (but not males) express more rejecting emotions towards a same-sex acquaintance who reveals a predilection to be unfaithful. These studies provide strong support for the role of uncertainty of paternity in the female self-presentational behaviors in the context of mate attraction.

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1. Introduction

Monogamous pair-bonding equalizes maternal and paternal investment in offspring and makes the two genders equally demanding when it comes to selecting long-term mates (Campbell, 2004; Geary, 1998). Thus, we can expect that, in humans, a species with high levels of paternal care, both males and females will be motivated to advertise their qualities as mates in order to attract desirable partners (Griskevicius, Cialdini, & Kenrick, 2006). Consistent with this logic, Tooke and Camire (1991) found that females attempt to enhance their physical appearance when they are trying to impress a potential mate. Likewise, research has shown that when in a long-term mating mindset, females are motivated to advertise their pro-social orientation and genetic quality by becoming more helpful (Griskevicius et al., 2007) and more creative (Griskevicius et al., 2006).

In this article, we argue that in the context of long-term-mate attraction one of the qualities that males desire and that females advertise is faithfulness. Males desire faithfulness because paternal investment is associated with risks as well as benefits (Symons, 1979; Trivers, 1972). Although by taking care of their offspring, males can ensure that their offspring survive to adulthood and reproduce themselves, they risk wasting time and resources by investing in another male's child (Buss, Larsen, Westen, & Semmelroth, 1992). In species with internal fertilization, males can rarely be certain that they have successfully impregnated their mate and, consequently, they can rarely be certain that they are the father of her offspring (Gross & Shine, 1981). The uncertainty of paternity is an adaptive problem (Trivers, 1972) that creates a selection pressure on males to care about their long-term partner's fidelity (Buss et al., 1992; Cann, Mangum, & Wells, 2001; Symons, 1979).

One consequence of the pressure posed by paternity uncertainty is male sexual jealousy, which is thought to be an evolved mechanism of mate guarding designed to protect against female infidelity (Daly, Wilson, & Weghorst, 1982; Greiling & Buss, 2000). Although both genders experience sexual jealousy, males experience it

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more often and more strongly. For example, Buss et al. (1992) found that males more than females report that they would be more upset by sexual infidelity and that females more than males report that they would be more upset by emotional infidelity. Buss et al. (1992) also showed that imagining sexual and emotional infidelities has differential effects on the male and female physiological reactions, such as electrodermal activation, pulse rate and the activity of *corrugator supercilli* (the muscles that produce an appearance of frowning). Males showed stronger reactions when imagining sexual infidelity, while females tended to show the reverse pattern.

Although male concern about a partner's sexual fidelity is powerful (Daly et al., 1982), it is not indiscriminate. Evolutionary theory predicts that its activation will be linked to expected paternal investment in offspring (Trivers, 1972; Whittingham, Taylor, & Robertson, 1992). If a male does not intend to invest in the first place, there is no need for him to be concerned about wasting resources on another male's offspring. In Masai culture, the only known culture where males openly tolerate wifely infidelity (Daly et al., 1982), inheritance is avuncular, such that males care for their sisters' offspring more than they do for their own. Such an arrangement is a clear indication of evolutionary forces at work. Males 'do not care' about their wives' sexual relationships with other males because (a) they do not expect to invest in her children and (b) they have another way to ensure the propagation of their genes into the next generation, i.e., caring for the offspring of a woman who is related to them.

Male sexual jealousy would not have evolved if it had not been successful at ensuring that females stay faithful; however, the existence of male sexual jealousy suggests that at least some females in evolutionary history reaped the benefits of pursuing a polymorphic strategy whereby they secured the investment of one male and discreetly engaged in extra-pair copulations with another, high-quality male (Greiling & Buss, 2000). If there are differences between females in the likelihood of being unfaithful (Bailey, Kirk, Zhu, Dunne, & Martin, 2000), then males would benefit if they preferred to invest in females who are likely to stay faithful in the first place. Consistent with this logic, Buss and Schmitt (1993) showed that males name faithfulness as one of the desired characteristics in their long-term romance partners.

If males prefer to assort themselves selectively with females who are more likely to remain faithful, females should be motivated to self-present to potential long-term partners in a way that suggests that they do not condone unfaithfulness. There are good theoretical reasons to believe that females are concerned enough about their sexual reputation (Campbell, 2004) to be motivated to manage impressions in this way. For example, teenage females avoid associating with other females known to be 'tarts' (Lees, 1993) because they fear acquiring a similar reputation by association. Females are also sometimes willing to engage in

physical violence in order to protect their sexual reputation (Campbell, 2004). Statistical data on female juvenile offenders obtained from various governmental agencies, including the FBI in the US and the Home Office in the UK, show that when female–female aggression occurs it is usually in poorer areas between women of approximately the same age (O'Brien, 1988) and the most important causes of fights are attacks on a female's or her friend's personal integrity, which include accusations of promiscuity (Campbell, 1986).

If faithfulness is something that males desire in their long-term mates and sexual integrity is something that females are concerned about, females who seek long-term partners should be motivated to communicate to prospective partners that they do not condone unfaithfulness. We therefore hypothesized that *when in a long-term relationship mindset, females will distance themselves from a female known to have been unfaithful.*

This pattern is predicted only for heterosexual, pre-menopausal females. This is due to the fact that faithfulness is important primarily because of the risk of adulterous conception. This risk is clearly minimal for postmenopausal females and there is no reason that males should not be 'aware' of this fact. If males care less about the sexual faithfulness of their post-menopausal partners' than they care about the sexual faithfulness of their younger and more fertile partners, it would be less important for post-menopausal females to actively self-present themselves as faithful, which means that they should be less motivated to engage in such self-presentational behavior. The age at which females reach menopause varies widely (Phillips, 2004), so any cut-off age will necessarily be arbitrary. The average age of reaching menopause is 51 years, with 2 to 8 years of peri-menopausal period when a woman's hormonal profile undergoes substantial changes. We therefore operationalized 'pre-menopausal' as being under the age of 50.

We conducted two studies to test our hypothesis regarding female self-presentational behavior. In Study 1, we primed participants with (i) a long-term romantic motive, (ii) a short-term romantic motive or (iii) a control motive. We then presented them with a verbal depiction of a woman who was (i) unfaithful and promiscuous, (ii) promiscuous but faithful or (iii) control. Participants were asked to indicate their reactions to the target female, including judging how likely they were to agree to go to a concert with her, indicating how much they would like to be her friend and judging how similar they were to her.

In Study 2, we investigated nonverbal expressions of social distancing. We examined how males and females reacted to a same-sex acquaintance who strongly implied that he or she was acting unfaithfully in one of three social contexts: (i) when the participant was accompanied by his or her date, (ii) when the participant was accompanied by an opposite-sex acquaintance or (iii) when the participant was accompanied by a same-sex friend.

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