Mate value both positively and negatively predicts intentions to commit an infidelity

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ABSTRACT

As a socially monogamous species, humans generally have one committed romantic partner at a time, but sometimes engage in infidelity. Previous research has related infidelity to individual difference traits, including global assessments of "mate value" (relative value as a romantic partner on the "mating market"). We explored the extent to which one's intention to commit an infidelity is uniquely predicted by different components of mate value. The results confirm a negative relationship between one's overall mate value and one's intention to commit an infidelity, and also identify four distinct mate value components (agreeableness/commitment, surgency, emotional stability, and physical attractiveness) that uniquely predict infidelity intention. Two of these factors, surgency (for women) and agreeableness/commitment (for men), *positively* predict anticipated infidelity. Additionally, the results indicate that men's but not women's infidelity intention is better predicted by the combination of their own and their partner's mate value. Discussion includes interpretations of the results in terms of potential social or personal advancement.

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1. Introduction

Humans are a socially monogamous species (Lukas & Clutton-Brock, 2013). This mating system is characterized by the social and romantic bonding of two individuals, but sexual or romantic exclusivity is not guaranteed. Although people generally have only one romantic partner at a time, they may concurrently engage in sexual or romantic activity (i.e., commit an infidelity) with a different partner. Greater than 25% of partnered individuals engage in infidelity (Drigotas & Barta, 2001). The likelihood of an individual committing an infidelity has been associated with many variables, from sex (male, female) and type of infidelity to relationship quality and personality characteristics of the partners.

Relevant to relationship quality, commitment to and satisfaction with the relationship predict infidelity. Specifically, people who report greater relationship commitment, or who have plans to demonstrate commitment such as through marriage, are less likely to commit an infidelity (Drigotas, Safstrom, & Gentilia, 1999; Maddox Shaw, Rhoades, Allen, Stanley, & Markman, 2013). Similarly, people who are more satisfied with their relationship are less likely to commit an infidelity (Maddox Shaw et al., 2013; Martins et al., 2016; Shackelford, Besser, & Goetz, 2008). This may be, in part, because infidelity is positively related to relationship dissolution (Lampard, 2014), which in turn is related to psychological distress, negative changes in life satisfaction, and reduced

health (Chung et al., 2002; Rhoades, Kamp Dush, Atkins, Stanley, & Markman, 2011). In short, people in good relationships may not want to risk losing that relationship by committing an infidelity.

On the other hand, not all relationship dissolutions are equally detrimental. Many people experience a period of personal growth following relationship dissolution, particularly if the relationship was of relatively low quality (Lewandowski & Bizzoco, 2007; Tashiro & Frazier, 2003). People in such relationships may not have the same aversion to the risk of relationship dissolution as do those in higher quality relationships, and so behave differently. Indeed, people in relationships characterized by more negative interactions, such as poor communication and psychological and physical aggression, are more likely to report committing an infidelity (Maddox Shaw et al., 2013), as are individuals in relationships they perceive to provide fewer opportunities for need fulfillment or self-expansion (Lewandowski & Ackerman, 2006).

Research using causal modeling to map the associations between relationship satisfaction and infidelity points to the importance of individual differences in members of the couple. Specifically, a substantial portion of relationship satisfaction, which predicts infidelity, appears to be caused by a partner's low conscientiousness and low agreeableness (Shackelford et al., 2008), two of the "Big Five" personality factors identified as strong personality predictors of infidelity (Barta & Kiene, 2005; Buss & Shackelford, 1997b). In other words, individuals who are hardworking and detail-oriented (conscientious) and are kind and friendly (agreeable) are more likely to be satisfied in their relationships, and so may be less likely to be unfaithful. In fact, in a large, cross-national study of personality characteristics associated with infidelity,

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agreeableness emerged above all other personality factors as the largest negative predictor of committing an infidelity (Schmitt, 2004).

Other individual difference traits, besides those associated with the Big Five factors, have also been linked to infidelity. For instance, the Dark Triad of narcissism (Buss & Shackelford, 1997b), psychopathy, and Machiavellianism (Jones & Weiser, 2014) have been positively associated with infidelity. Although this association has been interpreted in terms of destructive relationship behaviors (Jones & Weiser, 2014), these characteristics also may be indicative of perceived access to extra-pair mates. For example, among men, narcissism has been positively associated with attractiveness, such that women perceive men displaying narcissistic traits to be more attractive (Carter, Campbell, & Muncer, 2014). Additionally, these high-narcissism men may be both more likely to expend effort to increase perceptions of their attractiveness (Fox & Rooney, 2015) and to decrease their standards for selecting short-term mates (Jonason, Valentine, Li, & Harbeson, 2011). Together, these conditions may increase perceptions of the availability of extra-pair mating opportunities, a circumstance independently associated with the likelihood of committing an infidelity (Martins et al., 2016).

Attractiveness and access to high-value mates are indicative of one's own "mate value" (i.e., an individual's overall attractiveness as a potential mate on the "mating market"). That both characteristics are also related to infidelity suggests that mate value may be related to infidelity. Indeed, research indicates that mate value, as assessed by a global measure of attractiveness as a potential mate, predicts infidelity intentions, such that individuals with greater mate value than their long-term partners are more likely to report an intention to commit an infidelity (Buss & Shackelford, 1997a).

This positive relationship between relative mate value and infidelity supports the general hypotheses that infidelity is more likely among individuals with relatively attractive qualities or more infidelity opportunities. However, the positive relationship between relative mate value and infidelity complicates the interpretation of other evidence linking characteristics indicative of high mate value to lower likelihood of infidelity. For instance, agreeableness (Botwin, Buss, & Shackelford, 1997; Figueredo, Sefcek, & Jones, 2006) and sensation-seeking (Hugill, Fink, Neave, Besson, & Bunse, 2011) have been positively linked to mate value, such that individuals who are kind and friendly as well as those who seek out new and intense life experiences are perceived to be of higher mate value. However, these same traits also have been negatively linked to infidelity (Barta & Kiene, 2005; Buss & Shackelford, 1997b; O'Sullivan & Ronis, 2013; Schmitt, 2004). This suggests that different components of mate value may be differentially related to risk of infidelity. The current study explored this possibility, by evaluating the relationship between mate value and infidelity using an overall mate value score as well as scores along six different factors of mate value: agreeableness/commitment, resource potential, physical prowess, emotional stability, surgency, and physical attractiveness.

Additionally, given (1) sex differences in infidelity prevalence (Blow & Hartnett, 2005; Brand, Markey, Mills, & Hodges, 2007), (2) sex differences in reported mate value preferences (Buss, 1989; Eastwick & Finkel, 2008), (3) research identifying the importance of mate value discrepancy rather than absolute mate value (Buss & Shackelford, 1997b), and (4) the potential importance of differentiating sexual infidelity from emotional infidelity (Martins et al., 2016), we explored the extent to which infidelity intentions are influenced by one's partner's mate value and one's own mate value, and the extent to which these predictions are moderated by participant sex and infidelity type.

2. Methods

2.1. Participants

The data analyzed for this article were collected as part of a larger study on individual differences in men's and women's mating behaviors. Different analyses from subsamples of this dataset, testing different

hypotheses, have been presented elsewhere (see, e.g., Miner, Starratt, & Shackelford, 2009).

Participants were drawn from universities and surrounding communities. All participants reported being in a committed, heterosexual relationship at the time of participation. For the current article, participants' responses were included for analysis if they provided complete data for variables related to their own anticipated infidelity and their perceptions of their own and their partner's mate value. This resulted in a final sample of 312 participants (155 females) with a mean age of 24.1 years ($SD = 7.1$), a mean relationship length of 3.2 years ($SD = 4.6$), and mean partner age of 25.1 years ($SD = 8.3$). Participants registered in undergraduate psychology courses at the time of participation were offered partial course credit as incentive ($n = 240$). No other incentives were provided.

2.2. Materials

All participants completed an online survey, including a questionnaire soliciting information on their age, their partners' age, and the length of the current relationship. Participants then completed two versions – a self-report and a partner-report – of the Trait Specific Dependence Inventory (Ellis, Simpson, & Campbell, 2002). The TSDI is a 34-item inventory that assesses mate value-relevant individual difference characteristics along six factors: agreeableness/commitment (9 items; $\alpha_{self} = 0.91$, $\alpha_{partner} = 0.92$), resource accruing potential (10 items; $\alpha_{self} = 0.89$, $\alpha_{partner} = 0.92$), physical prowess (3 items; $\alpha_{self} = 0.77$, $\alpha_{partner} = 0.68$), emotional stability (4 items; $\alpha_{self} = 0.73$, $\alpha_{partner} = 0.78$), surgency (5 items; $\alpha_{self} = 0.82$, $\alpha_{partner} = 0.84$), and physical attractiveness (3 items; $\alpha_{self} = 0.97$, $\alpha_{partner} = 0.87$). The self-report version assessed the participant's mate value relative to same-sex rivals (e.g., "If you and your current partner broke up, how difficult would it be for your partner to find someone who is as [physically attractive/generous/ambitious/practical/etc.] as you?"). The partner-report version assessed the participant's partners' mate value relative to potential alternatives (e.g., "If you and your current partner broke up, how difficult would it be for you to find another partner who is as physically attractive?"). All responses were recorded on a Likert scale anchored by $1 = $ Not difficult at all and $5 = $ Extremely difficult, such that higher scores indicate higher mate value. The TSDI has been established as a valid and reliable measure of mate value in romantic relationships (Ellis et al., 2002).

Participants also answered two questions about their own intentions to commit an infidelity while still in a relationship with their current partner: "How likely do you think it is that you will in the future [have sexual intercourse with/fall in love with] someone other than your current partner, while in a relationship with your current partner?" Responses were recorded on a Likert scale anchored by $0 = $ Definitely no to $9 = $ Definitely yes.

3. Results

In this sample, 66% of women and 51% of men reported zero intention to commit a sexual infidelity, and 52% of women and 45% of men reported zero intention to commit an emotional infidelity. Given the non-normal distribution skewed toward zero, each infidelity variable was dichotomized into no intention and at least some intention to commit an infidelity.

We conducted several logistic regressions, predicting intention to commit an infidelity (sexual and emotional) from self and partner mate value, for both men and women. For each regression, the mate value of the person whose behavior was being predicted was entered in block 1, with the partners' mate value entered in block 2. All predictor variables were standardized prior to analysis, to aid in the interpretation of the odds ratios.