

Not all men are sexually coercive: A preliminary investigation of the moderating effect of mate desirability on the relationship between female infidelity and male sexual coercion

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Abstract

Previous research has demonstrated the utility of men's perceptions of their partner's infidelity as a predictor of male sexual coercion in the context of an intimate relationship (Goetz & Shackelford, 2006; Starratt, Goetz, Shackelford, McKibbin, & Stewart-Williams, *in press*). Not all men who suspect partner infidelity are sexually coercive, however. Using reports secured from 280 men in a committed, sexual relationship with a woman, the current research provides preliminary evidence of a moderating effect of relative mate desirability in the relationship between perceptions of female infidelity and male sexual coercion. Specifically, men's perceptions of their partner's infidelity are positively related to men's sexual coercion only in those relationships in which the man perceives that he is of equal or greater desirability than his partner. Men's perceptions of their partner's infidelity are not related to sexual coercion by men who perceive that they are less desirable than their partners. The discussion addresses interpretations of these findings, limitations of the current study, and directions for future research.

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1. Female infidelity, male sexual coercion, and relative mate desirability

Men sometimes attempt to control their intimate partners. One form of coercion used by men is sexual coercion. In an intimate relationship, sexual coercion can include forcible rape but often takes the form of more subtle tactics, such as withholding financial resources if a woman does not consent to sex (Carr & VanDeusen, 2004; Johnson & Sigler, 2000; Marshall & Holtzworth-Munroe, 2002; Shackelford & Goetz, 2004). Regardless of whether sexual coercion is physical or non-physical, women who have been sexually coerced by an intimate partner experience negative physical and psychological consequences, including poor body image, low self-esteem, social anxiety,

unplanned pregnancy, and contraction of a sexually transmitted disease (Campbell, 1989; Livingston, Buddie, Testa, & VanZile-Tamsen, 2004; Zweig, Crockett, Sayer, & Vicary, 1999). Identifying the predictors and correlates of sexual coercion will better position researchers to develop interventions aimed at reducing this costly behavior.

The current study investigates men's sexual coercion using the Sexual Coercion in Intimate Relationships Scale (SCIRS; Shackelford & Goetz, 2004). The SCIRS differs from other measures of sexual coercion, such as the Aggressive Sexual Behavior Inventory (Mosher & Anderson, 1986), the Sexual Situation Questionnaire (O'Sullivan & Byers, 1993), and the Coercive Sexuality Scale (Rapaport & Burkhart, 1984), in that it specifically assesses coercion in the context of an intimate relationship, rather than between casually dating partners. The SCIRS also assesses a variety of behaviors, from outright physical force (e.g., "I physically forced my partner to have sex with me") to more

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subtle manipulations (e.g., “I hinted that if my partner loved me she would have sex with me”).

Several predictors of sexual coercion in the context of an intimate relationship have been identified, including male low self-esteem (Burke, Stets, & Pirog-Good, 1988), male alcohol and pornography consumption (Carr & VanDeusen, 2004), and male sexual jealousy (Frieze, 1983). Goetz and Shackelford (2006) also identified men’s perceptions of their partner’s infidelity as a predictor of sexual coercion. The current research extends investigation of this relationship by including a measure of relative mate desirability as a moderating factor.

Goetz and Shackelford (2006) reported that men’s perceptions of their partner’s infidelity (i.e., ratings of the likelihood that their partners had sex with another man over the duration of the current relationship) are related positively to men’s sexual coercion of their partner. Goetz and Shackelford argue that, in addition to forcible rape of their partners, men may engage in relatively discrete forms of sexual coercion, such as withholding monetary benefits his partner depends on if she does not consent to sex, in an attempt to lessen the likelihood of his partner’s defection from the relationship. This argument implies that there are costs to men of using sexual coercion (e.g., mate defection) in addition to the proposed benefits (e.g., mate retention, future infidelity deterrence).

Partner infidelity can be so costly to men that even the perceived likelihood of partner infidelity is sufficient to trigger the use of sexually coercive behaviors (Goetz & Shackelford, 2006). Not all men who perceive their partners to be unfaithful engage in sexual coercion, however. Under what circumstances might the benefits of sexual coercion no longer outweigh the costs for some men? The current study investigates one such possible moderator, mate desirability – an evaluation of the characteristics one possesses compared to the characteristics desired by potential mates (Buss & Barnes, 1986). A man’s assessment of his own desirability as a long-term mate relative to his partner’s desirability as a long-term mate may moderate the relationship between perceived female infidelity and male sexual coercion. For example, a man who perceives himself to be less desirable as a mate compared to his partner may not risk sexually coercing his partner, because he is unlikely to secure another partner of such high desirability should his partner defect from the relationship as a result of his coercion. Instead, he may engage in less “risky” coercive or mate guarding behaviors, such as bringing his partner flowers or buying her gifts.

2. Methods

2.1. Participants

Two hundred eighty men, each of whom was in a committed, sexual relationship with a woman, participated in this study. The mean age of the participants was 25.2 years ($SD = 7.5$), the mean age of the participants’ partners was

23.9 years ($SD = 6.8$), and the mean relationship length was 46.2 months ($SD = 53.1$). Participants were drawn from universities and surrounding metropolitan communities. Due to the sensitive nature of the topic and to assure anonymity, no further demographic information was collected.

2.2. Materials

Participants completed a demographic questionnaire that solicited information on the participant’s age, his partner’s age, and the duration of his current relationship. This questionnaire also collected information on the participant’s perceptions of his own desirability as a mate compared to his partner’s desirability as a mate and his perception of his partner’s previous infidelity. Mate desirability is a measure of desirability as a mate compared to that of his partner (see Buss, 2003, for review). Men were asked, “Who is more desirable as a long-term partner?” and then responded on a 10-point ordered category scale anchored by 0 = I am much more desirable as a long-term partner and 9 = My partner is much more desirable as a long-term partner. Based on their responses to this question, men were placed into one of three categories. Men who responded with scores of 0–3 were categorized as perceiving themselves to be more desirable than their current partner. Men who responded with scores of 4–5 were categorized as perceiving that he and his partner are equally desirable as mates. Men who responded with scores of 6–9 were categorized as perceiving themselves to be less desirable than their current partner. Female infidelity was a measure of a man’s perception of his partner’s past infidelity. Men were asked, “As far as you know, has your current partner had sexual intercourse with someone other than you since you have been involved in a relationship together?” Men then respond on a 10-point ordered category scale anchored by 0 = Definitely No and 9 = Definitely Yes. There is not yet an empirical literature on the accuracy of men’s perceptions of their partner’s infidelity. However, we expect that men’s behaviors will vary with their perceptions of partner infidelity and not necessarily with actual partner infidelity. We do not expect men to alter their behavior if their partner had been unfaithful but they were not aware of the infidelity. In the same manner, we expect men to alter their behavior if they perceived that their partner had been unfaithful, even if these perceptions were not accurate.

Upon completion of the demographic questionnaire, participants completed the SCIRS (Shackelford & Goetz, 2004). The SCIRS secures information about how often the participant performed 34 sexually coercive acts in the past month. Items in the SCIRS vary in subtlety, ranging from hinting and subtle manipulations to outright physical force. These 34 items cluster into three components: Resource Manipulation/Violence (e.g., “I hinted that I would withhold benefits that my partner depends on if she did not have sex with me”, “I physically forced my

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