



Original Article

Coping with mate poaching: gender differences in detection of infidelity-related threats



Tsachi Ein-Dor^{*}, Adi Perry-Paldi, Gilad Hirschberger, Gurit E. Birnbaum, Danit Deutsch

Interdisciplinary Center (IDC) Herzliya, School of Psychology, Herzliya, Israel

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ABSTRACT

People often aspire for true love and committed romantic relationships. These relationships, however, are recurrently threatened by partner infidelity. The present research tested a new infidelity-detection model, the *rivalry sensitivity hypothesis*, that posits that women are more sensitive to cues of infidelity than men are, and tend to focus their attention on potential rivals in their mate's vicinity, whereas men show increased sensitivity of their own partners. In a series of four studies, we found that women displayed greater alertness to cues of potential partner unfaithfulness than did men, were quicker and more accurate in detecting cues of infidelity, but were not better than men in detecting other threats. Women also focused their attention on potential rivals (other women), whereas men's attention was specifically directed at monitoring their own partner's intents. These findings suggest that women and men have developed different strategies aimed at achieving a similar outcome – mate retention.

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Long-term romantic commitments fulfill people's needs for love, intimacy, and companionship, and may significantly contribute to well-being and life satisfaction (e.g., Dush & Amato, 2005). Nevertheless, many relationships that were intended to last eventually dissolve, and even within relationships that persevere the rate of infidelity is substantial. Approximately 22–25% of men and 11–15% of women indicate that they have engaged in extramarital sex (see Allen et al., 2005 for a review). These rates increase to about 70% when including significant emotional involvement with other partners or adulterous behaviors that are not defined as full intercourse (Blow & Hartnett, 2005; Buunk, 1980; Glass & Wright, 1985; Kinsey, Pomeroy, Martin, & Gebhard, 1953). Because infidelity often comes at a high cost emotionally, interpersonally, genetically, and financially (Charny & Parnass, 1995; Cano & O'Leary, 2000; Greiling & Buss, 2000; Gordon, Baucom, & Snyder, 2004; Steiner, Suarez, Sells, & Wykes, 2011), strategies to detect threats to the relationship have arisen during human evolution among both women and men (Buss, 2002; Harris, 2003). Of specific interest are the mechanisms that were evolved to address mate poaching (i.e., attempts to lure people away from their current partners), which is an ongoing threat to relationships, occurring at a high frequency.

Research indicates that over 50% of men and women have attempted to poach other people's mates, and that 87% of men and 94% of women in a relationship have been propositioned to have a brief sexual encounter with another person. The mate-guarding hypothesis (Buss, 1988), which constitutes the most widely accepted

explanation for these behaviors, suggests that both men and women monitor their mates' behavior to prevent their defection (Buss, 2002). Recently, however, Puts (2010) has contended that men tend to adopt mate guarding strategies, whereas women are likely to utilize other means to prevent infidelity. In the present research, we examined Puts's (2010) proposition that the mate-guarding hypothesis holds true for men alone. In addition, we proposed that women might have evolved a specific infidelity detection mechanism to prevent mate poaching and related responses (i.e., the rivalry sensitivity hypothesis). This proposal refines Buss's (1988) original hypothesis and suggests that men and women are motivated to detect signs of infidelity, but have developed different strategies to do so.

Both men and women are concerned with infidelity. Although early research has indicated that men are more sensitive to sexual infidelity, whereas women – to emotional infidelity (Buss, Larsen, Westen, & Semmelroth, 1992; Shackelford & Buss, 1997), recent studies have revealed that men and women show relatively similar concerns with either sexual or emotional infidelity (for recent meta-analyses see Carpenter, 2012; Sagarin et al., 2012). Men and women alike suffer from the consequences of partner unfaithfulness (Gordon et al., 2004; Steiner et al., 2011), and respond with intense emotions when they discover that their partner has cheated on them (e.g., Cano & O'Leary, 2000). Research and theory are equivocal regarding the evolved mechanisms that enable men and women to avoid spousal infidelity (either sexual or emotional) and its related consequences.

According to Trivers (1972), women make significantly higher parental investments than men, because of their limited number of eggs and the time needed for gestation and lactation. These differences lead men to compete over women, and lead women to

^{*} Corresponding author. School of Psychology, Interdisciplinary Center, P.O. Box 167, Herzliya, 46150, Israel.

E-mail address: teindor@idc.ac.il (T. Ein-Dor).

be more selective in their mating choices than men to avoid pregnancy from an unsuitable mate (also see Uvnäs-Moberg, Arn, Theorell, & Jonsson, 1991). For men, sexual success involves removing same-sex competitors and the resources that may attract women to them (Emlen & Oring, 1977). According to the dimensionality hypothesis (Puts, 2010), warding off competitors is feasible in species that live in one-dimensional environments of burrows and tunnels, and in two-dimensional environments such as dry land, but impossible in three dimensional space (air, water, or trees), where there are too many in-routes for competitors. Because humans reside in two-dimensional environments, men have evolved mate guarding strategies to address the problem of mate poaching (Buss, 1988; Buss & Shackelford, 1997; Shackelford, Goetz, Buss, Euler, & Hoier, 2005; Haselton & Gangestad, 2006). Specifically, over evolutionary time men developed to be larger, stronger, faster, and more physically aggressive than women are. The degree of sexual dimorphism in these traits rivals that of species with intense male contests (Puts, 2010) such as gorillas, which are the most sexually dimorphic of all living primates (Zihlman & McFarland, 2000). These differences in muscularity translate into large differences in strength and speed, with the average man being stronger than 99.9% of women (Lassek & Gaulin, 2009). Therefore, men are hypothesized to rely almost exclusively on dominance-based strategies that are focused on their partner to ensure that she remains faithful (Puts, 2010).

Women, in contrast, cannot prevent mates from defecting from a relationship by using forceful tactics to dominate their partner. For them, it may be futile to try to coerce their partner. To effectively avoid infidelity they may, therefore, need to focus their attention on potential rivals rather than on their partner. To this end, they must carefully monitor multiple targets – other women in the vicinity of their partner – and be attentive to indications of possible spousal unfaithfulness to nip any chance of infidelity at the bud. Addressing a potential threat before it materializes is advantageous for women as it confronts the threat without requiring the use of force. This type of zone defense, which differs from men's person-to-person defense, may lead women to be overall more sensitive to cues of infidelity than men (either sexual or emotional), to be more sensitive to ambiguous signs of spousal unfaithfulness, which often come at the initial stage of infidelity, and to be more accurate in detecting such cues. Because women need to continuously monitor multiple threats (other potential mates) and accurately decipher early signs of unfaithfulness, they are expected to show overall higher infidelity-detection sensitivity than men who are expected to focus their attention primarily on their partner.

To examine the *rivalry sensitivity hypothesis* and its implications to women's sensitivity to cues of infidelity, we designed four studies. In Study 1, we examined whether women are generally more sensitive than men with regards to infidelity. In Study 2, we examined whether women are not only more suspicious than men about the possibility of infidelity, but also more accurate in detecting cues of infidelity. In Study 3, we examined whether accuracy in detecting cues of infidelity are specific to unfaithfulness and not to other threats with evolutionary repercussions (e.g., a threat from poisonous animals). In Study 4, we examined the central contention of the rivalry sensitivity hypothesis: Infidelity detection would function differently for men and women, such that men would show increased sensitivity of their own partners, whereas women would monitor other women in their mate's vicinity.

1. Study 1

In Study 1, we examined whether men and women differ in the extent to which they appraise ambiguous partner-related incidents as comprising a threat of infidelity. To this end, participants completed self-report measures of partner distrust, history of infidelity, and socio-economic status, and then were asked to appraise whether or

not a partner-related event portrays a clear threat of infidelity (yes or no responses). We hypothesized that women would judge more incidents as comprising a threat of infidelity than men. We tested this hypothesis while taking into account gender differences in the extent of mistrusting romantic partners in general and participants' experience with infidelity.

1.1. Method

1.1.1. Participants

One hundred and ninety four heterosexual Israeli participants (80 men and 114 women aged 18–62, $M = 24.70$, $SD = 5.36$) from the general community volunteered to participate in the study. The sample size was predetermined by a power analysis (Faul, Erdfelder, Buchner, & Lang, 2009) to allow 80% power for detecting a weak-to-moderate effect size (190 participants were needed). Most of the participants were single (88.8%), yet in a relationship (62%). About 1 out of 7 participants (16%) reported that at least one of her or his partners committed an act of sexual infidelity, and about 1 out of 10 participants (10.4%) reported that he or she was involved in a sexual affair.

1.1.2. Materials and procedure

The study was presented as research on perceptions of romantic relationships. The participants constituted a convenience sample recruited from a wide variety of sources (postings on bulletin boards and in online forums). The data were gathered using Qualtrics Labs, Inc. software, Version 2012 of the Qualtrics Research Suite.

After electronically signing a consent form, participants completed a 5-item self-report measure of partner distrust that was developed for the present research (e.g., "In romantic relationships, one has to be alert or someone is likely to take advantage of him."). Participants rated the extent to which they tend to mistrust romantic partners on a 7-point scale ranging from not at all (1) to very much (7). Confirmatory factor analysis using MPlus 6.1 (Muthén & Muthén, 1998–2010) indicated intact unidimensionality, $\chi^2_{(2)} = 3.95$, $p = .14$, $CFI = .99$, $TLI = .96$, $RMSEA = .07$ (Cronbach's α was $.71$). Accordingly, a mean partner distrust score was computed for each participant.

After completing this questionnaire, participants were asked to read eleven vignettes, depicting social interactions between couples that described ambiguous signs of partner unfaithfulness (e.g., "Your partner has a close friend from high school who is a member of the opposite sex. They talk a lot over the phone and share personal stories. They often meet alone."). Then, participants were asked to appraise whether or not each vignette portrayed a clear threat of infidelity (yes, no). For each participant, we counted the number of incidents appraised as a threat of infidelity. The vignettes were preselected in a pilot study ($N = 25$) in which participants rated the extent to which each vignette comprised overt cues of partner unfaithfulness on a 7-point scale ranging from not at all (1) to very much (7).

After the completion of the task, participants answered two questions regarding their experience with infidelity: "Did one of your past or present romantic partners ever commit an act of sexual infidelity?", and "Were you ever involved in a romantic affair while in a committed relationship?" Then, they completed a socio-demographic questionnaire, were electronically informed about the purpose of the study, and thanked.

1.2. Results and discussion

Preliminary analyses indicated that men and women did not differ in the prevalence of being involved in a romantic affair, $\chi^2_{(1)} = 1.83$, $p = .18$, $r_c = .10$, or in their level of mistrust towards their romantic partners, $t_{(192)} = 1.43$, $p = .15$. More women, however, reported that their partner had cheated on them than men, $\chi^2_{(1)} = 5.30$, $p = .02$, $r_c = .17$ (22.1% of women vs. 8.8% of men). Because people who had experienced infidelity in their past show greater sensitivity to

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