

Singapore Management University

Institutional Knowledge at Singapore Management University

Research Collection School of Social Sciences

School of Social Sciences

12-2016

Violation of long-term mate preferences

M. L. W. LONG

Norman P. LI

Singapore Management University, normanli@smu.edu.sg

Follow this and additional works at: https://ink.library.smu.edu.sg/soss_research



Part of the [Applied Behavior Analysis Commons](#), [Social Psychology Commons](#), and the [Social Psychology and Interaction Commons](#)

Citation

LONG, M. L. W., & LI, Norman P.. (2016). Violation of long-term mate preferences. In *Encyclopedia of evolutionary psychological science* (pp.). Cham: Springer.

Available at: https://ink.library.smu.edu.sg/soss_research/3185

This Book Chapter is brought to you for free and open access by the School of Social Sciences at Institutional Knowledge at Singapore Management University. It has been accepted for inclusion in Research Collection School of Social Sciences by an authorized administrator of Institutional Knowledge at Singapore Management University. For more information, please email cherylids@smu.edu.sg.

Violation of Long-Term Mate Preferences

M. L. W. Long¹ and Norman P. Li²

¹University of Southampton, Southampton, UK

²Singapore Management University, Singapore, Singapore

Synonyms

[Deception](#); [Intersexual strategic interference](#); [Long-term mating](#); [Mate preferences](#); [Mate selection](#)

Definition

Violations of long-term mate preferences refer to instances in which a person in a long-term relationship has mate preferences that were in place when the relationship commenced but subsequently are not being met.

Introduction

According to an evolutionary perspective, mate preferences evolved through natural and sexual selection to adaptively guide individuals to select reproductively viable mates (Buss and Schmitt 1993; Symons 1979). A host of evidence has supported various hypotheses on mate

preferences, including studies conducted through surveys, numerous naturalistic settings, and modern, live-interactive contexts (Li and Meltzer 2015). Although mate preferences have, on average, led to adaptive choices over thousands of generations, they are not always fulfilled in the mates that people actually select, and even when they initially are, conditions occur that eventually prevent at least some preferences from being met. Indeed, selecting mates and maintaining them over the course of a long-term relationship involves a large degree of judgment uncertainty and dynamics between individuals whose reproductive interests are overlapping but far from identical. Initial assessments can be inaccurate, conditions can change, and partners often face sexual conflict; hence, there is plenty of room for mate preference violations to occur. Here, the focus is on violations of long-term mate preferences – ways in which one’s preferences for a long-term, committed relationship partner are not being met during such a relationship.

Long-Term Relationships

Long-term relationships involve commitment over a relatively long time horizon and include steady relationships and marriage. From an evolutionary perspective, long-term mating is adaptive for many reasons including that it allows partners to jointly pool resources and efforts in cooperatively raising offspring (Buss and Schmitt 1993).

Although mate preferences likely evolved to adaptively guide the selection of reproductively beneficial mates, there are several reasons that mate preference violations may occur in a long-term relationship, including the following: (1) inaccurate assessment of traits during the courtship phase, (2) a relative decline in a partner's mate value, and (3) conflicting strategic interests. Generally, lower consistencies between ideal mate preferences and associated perceptions of one's partner result in lower levels of relationship satisfaction. However, the consequences of long-term mate preference violation also vary depending on factors such as an individual's own mate value and whether there are alternative candidates who are more attractive than one's existing partner.

Inaccurate Initial Assessment of Traits

During the mate selection process, individuals assess one another and try to obtain mates who are in line with their evolved mate preferences. Preferences have been characterized by evolutionary psychologists using various models, including those where individuals utilize minimum-criteria trait thresholds as well as priorities to ensure reproductive viability. However, the precise value of each trait may be hard to observe. Indeed, this is a potential reason why many speed-dating studies have failed to find correspondence between people's mate preferences and the criteria that they use to select actual mates (Li and Meltzer 2015). More generally, trait and other mating-relevant information is likely imperfect not only in the first few minutes of initial meetings such as in modern speed-dating events, but even over time. A potential barrier to accurate assessment is that traits are often misrepresented by individuals being assessed. For example, especially during mate selection, people may present themselves as favorably as possible and not disclose negative aspects about themselves; women may attempt to appear younger – and hence, more fertile – than they really are; and men may attempt to represent higher-than-actual social status and resources (Tooke and Camire 1991). In the modern day, the multi-billion dollar cosmetics industry and rapidly expanding

plastic surgery market attest to the prevalence of women appearing younger and more reproductively fit. Likewise, expensive sports cars are often purchased by men who incur large amounts of debt and hence, cannot actually afford (over the long haul) such expensive indicators of status. Indeed, in a competitive mate-market context, the strategic use of misrepresentation may have been selected for because successful deception can promote one's own reproductive fitness (Tooke and Camire 1991).

Relative Decline in Partner's Mate Value

Another way that preferences can be violated within an ongoing long-term relationship is when, over the course of a relationship, one partner loses or gains mate value relative to the other person. Because mate preferences or standards tend to be indexed to people's own desirability in the mating market (e.g., more physically attractive women desire men with more resources), changes in relative mate value will tend to violate the mate preferences of the person whose mate value becomes relatively higher. For example, a man may lose his job, which decreases his social status and mate value and thus, his partner's preference for high social status may be violated. Indeed, women are especially likely to leave a marriage when the husband loses his job. Similarly, for women more than men, a decrease in mate value could occur due to beauty (and fertility) fading with age, which may violate partners' preference for a physically attractive and fertile mate. Noticeable changes in health can also directly impact both men's and women's mate value. A change in the operational sex ratio could also trigger relative changes in mate value, in that the sex that is decreasingly represented in the population gains position and leverage (by having more potential mates competing for them) over the sex with whose numbers have increased.

Conflicting Strategic Interests

People in long-term relationships may also have their preferences violated from conflicts in mating

strategy. For instance, it may be in the interest of one person to have backup mates or affair partners but to have one's partner remain faithful and removed from mating options. Men and, to some extent, women benefit reproductively from engaging in extrapair mating (e.g., Greiling and Buss 2000). Indeed, women may have evolved a dual mating strategy in which they acquire investment from their primary mate and higher-quality genes for their progeny via timely sexual affairs outside the relationship when women are ovulating and thus, most likely to become pregnant from having sex. However, a dual strategy would directly violate men's evolved preference for a long-term partner's fidelity and hence, paternity certainty. Similarly, men's sexual activity outside a long-term relationship may violate women's preferences by diverting energy and resources to others. Research on sexual jealousy (Buss et al. 1992) indicates that men's long-term mate preferences are especially violated when their partners engage in *sexual* infidelity, whereas women's long-term preferences are more negatively affected by a partner's *emotional* infidelity. Specifically, women's sexual infidelity threatens men's evolved desire for paternity certainty, whereas a man falling in love with another woman threatens his continued investment of time, energy, and resources in the current relationship.

When Long-Term Preferences Are Violated

Several things can happen when long-term preferences are violated. First, the violated person may exit the relationship or attempt to turn to or find replacement partners. These actions in turn constitute violations to the preferences of the other partner, who may then react with his or her own violation-response tactics. Over time, balance may be restored or, if not, the relationship may dissolve.

Violated individuals may also attempt to eliminate or reduce the cause of the violation. For instance, a person may threaten a partner's potential extrapair mate or engage in other mate guarding behaviors to reduce the likelihood of a partner's infidelity. Similarly, the person who has

comparatively lower mate value may engage in mate retention tactics to maintain the relationship and persuade the partner of higher mate value not to leave. Along these lines, Buss (1988) identified five categories of mate retention tactics: positive inducements (e.g., "Complimented me on my appearance"), public signals of possession (e.g., "Held my hand while other men were around"), direct guarding (e.g., "Wanted to be with me all the time so that I could not meet anyone else"), intersexual negative inducements (e.g., "Became angry when I flirted too much"), and intrasexual negative inducements (e.g., "Stared coldly at a man who was looking at me").

Men with lower mate value, in particular, may resort to cost-inflicting mate retention behaviors (Daly and Wilson 1993). For example, men with lower-status jobs and lower income are more likely to inflict physical harm on their intimate partners. Women, on the other hand, use more direct guarding and other forms of intersexual negative inducements, which are also cost-inflicting on their partners and reduce the chances that the men would have to cheat on them. Positive inducements and public signals of possession, which have been called benefit-inducing mate retention tactics (Miner et al. 2009), are displayed more by and toward partners with higher mate value, and they may provide a more positive relationship climate in which partners are likely to be satisfied. Such behavior (e.g., buying one's partner gifts, planning romantic getaways) provides the mate with more inducements to stay and keep investing in their partner and signals to others that they are no longer available.

Similarly, the partner with higher mate value can also engage in positive inducements in order to restore the equilibrium of mate values in the relationship (e.g., asking a male partner to get a higher-paying job or persuading a female partner to diet and slim down). Although confrontations can be initially distressing for both individuals, attempts to get partners to change for the better is positively associated with relationship well-being over time (Baker and McNulty 2015). If all else fails, an individual may choose to terminate a long-term relationship, especially if the individual deems that he or she has desirable alternative

mates that can be attained or, if relevant, that he or she has enough resources to take care of any extant offspring. Another possibility, albeit less likely even in today's evolutionarily novel environment, would be for both partners to agree on an open or polyamorous relationship in which both partners continue investing in the current relationship (perhaps at a reduced level) while diverting some of their resources into acquiring or maintaining additional mates.

Conclusion

In summary, violation of long-term mate preferences can occur due to many factors, including errors in judgment from imperfect information and partner's deception, the relative erosion of a partner's mate value over time, and conflicts in mating strategies. The consequences of long-term mate preference violation are often dependent on factors such as the extent of the discrepancy of mate value. In response to mate preference violations, individuals in long-term relationships may exit the relationship or seek alternatives or attempt to rectify the violation. In the modern world, there are likely many evolutionarily novel conditions – including the proliferation of virtual competitors and potential mates encountered in media outlets – that trigger such violations in increasing frequency. Future research could carefully investigate such factors that are likely increasing the incidence of mate preference violation to historically unprecedented levels. At the same time, further work looking into the effectiveness of different types of mate retention tactics may provide insights into whether the increasingly high incidence of long-term relationship failure in modern society can be curbed.

Cross-References

- ▶ Adaptations Biased by Design: Error Management Theory
- ▶ Adaptive Assessment of Heritable Qualities
- ▶ As a Mean to Long-term Mate
- ▶ Consequence of Strategic Interference

- ▶ Cues to Infidelity
- ▶ Detecting Infidelity
- ▶ Deter Partner Infidelity
- ▶ Dual Mating Hypothesis
- ▶ Error Management Theory
- ▶ Evolution of Long-Term Pair-Bonding in Humans
- ▶ Female Choice
- ▶ Female Choice Among Males
- ▶ Female Choice and Sexual Conflict Theory
- ▶ Female Deception
- ▶ Female Infidelity
- ▶ Female Manipulation of Men
- ▶ Female Mate Choice
- ▶ Female Mate Choice (Intersexual Selection)
- ▶ Human Courting
- ▶ Infidelity
- ▶ Infidelity & Relationship Threats
- ▶ Infidelity Risk
- ▶ Intimate Partner Violence
- ▶ Jealousy & Infidelity
- ▶ Long-Term Mating
- ▶ Male Detection of Deception
- ▶ Male Mate Choice
- ▶ Male Sexual Jealousy to Deter Partner Infidelity
- ▶ Manipulation
- ▶ Manipulation and Dishonest Signals
- ▶ Manipulation by Others
- ▶ Mate Preferences
- ▶ Mate Preferences After Having Children
- ▶ Mate Retention
- ▶ Mate Retention After Children
- ▶ Mate Retention and Romantic Attachment
- ▶ Mate Retention Strategies
- ▶ Mate Retention Tactic
- ▶ Mate Selection Strategy (Version of Sexy Sons Hypothesis)
- ▶ Mate Value
- ▶ Mate Value Inflation
- ▶ Mating Strategies
- ▶ Mating Strategies in Conflict
- ▶ Mating Strategy Equilibria
- ▶ Men Regard as More Undesirable than Women
- ▶ Men Value More than Women
- ▶ Men With Poor Mating Prospects
- ▶ Men's Lethal Violence Against Women Attempting to Leave

- ▶ Men's Non-Lethal Violence Against Women Attempting to Leave
- ▶ Men's Suspicions of Partner Infidelity
- ▶ Men's Long-Term Strategies
- ▶ Men's Mate Preferences
- ▶ Observed Mating Behavior and Women's Long-Term Mating
- ▶ Operational Sex Ratio
- ▶ Parental Investment as Mate Retention
- ▶ Paternity Certainty as Benefit to Men of Long-Term Mating
- ▶ Perceptions of Infidelity
- ▶ Perceptions Of Infidelity Cues
- ▶ Polyandry
- ▶ Polygamy
- ▶ Polygamy in Humans
- ▶ Polygynous Men Afford Access to Resources
- ▶ Polygyny
- ▶ Prevention of Infidelity
- ▶ Reactions to Infidelity
- ▶ Relationship Dissolution
- ▶ Relationship Dissolution & Divorce
- ▶ Relationship Dissolution and Violence
- ▶ Reproduction: Sexual Conflict and Strategic Interference Theory
- ▶ Self-Esteem Reflects Assessments of Valuation
- ▶ Self-Esteem Tracks Mate Value
- ▶ Self-Evaluations Track Perceived Mate Value
- ▶ Sex Differences in Human Mate Preferences (Buss 1989)
- ▶ Sex Differences in Long-Term Mating Preferences
- ▶ Sex Differences in Short-Term Mating Preferences
- ▶ Sex Ratio and Men's Long-Term Mating
- ▶ Sexual Assault and Intimate Partner Violence
- ▶ Sexual Conflict and Strategic Interference Theory (Buss)
- ▶ Sexual Conflict as a Mechanism of Sexual Selection
- ▶ Sexual Conflict During Mating
- ▶ Sexual Conflict in Mating Strategies
- ▶ Sexual Conflict Theory (Middle-Level Theory in Evolutionary Psychology)
- ▶ Sexual Infidelity Vs Emotional Infidelity
- ▶ Sexual Jealousy in Long-Term Relationships
- ▶ Strategic Interference Theory (Buss)
- ▶ Suspected Partner Infidelity
- ▶ Use of Mate Retention Strategies
- ▶ Violation of Long-Term Mating Preferences
- ▶ Violation of Preferences
- ▶ Violation of Short-Term Mating Preferences
- ▶ Women's Long-term Strategies
- ▶ Women's Mate Value

References

- Baker, L. R., & McNulty, J. K. (2015). Adding insult to injury partner depression moderates the association between partner-regulation attempts and partners' motivation to resolve interpersonal problems. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, *41*(6), 839–852.
- Buss, D. (1988). From vigilance to violence. *Ethology and Sociobiology*, *9*(5), 291–317.
- Buss, D. M. (1989). Sex differences in human mate preferences: Evolutionary hypotheses tested in 37 cultures. *Behavioral and Brain Sciences*, *12*, 1–49.
- Buss, D., & Schmitt, D. (1993). Sexual Strategies Theory: An evolutionary perspective on human mating. *Psychological Review*, *100*(2), 204–232.
- Buss, D. M., Larsen, R. J., Westen, D., & Semmelroth, J. (1992). Sex differences in jealousy: Evolution, physiology, and psychology. *Psychological Science*, *3*, 251–255.
- Daly, M., & Wilson, M. (1993). An evolutionary perspective on male sexual proprietariness and violence against wives. *Violence and Victims*, *8*, 271–294.
- Greiling, H., & Buss, D. M. (2000). Women's sexual strategies: The hidden dimension of extra-pair mating. *Personality and Individual Differences*, *28*, 929–963.
- Li, N., & Meltzer, A. (2015). The validity of sex-differentiated mate preferences: Reconciling the seemingly conflicting evidence. *Evolutionary Behavioral Sciences*, *9*(2), 89–106.
- Miner, E., Starratt, V., & Shackelford, T. (2009). It's not all about her: Men's mate value and mate retention. *Personality and Individual Differences*, *47*(3), 214–218.
- Symons, D. (1979). *The evolution of human sexuality*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Tooke, W., & Camire, L. (1991). Patterns of deception in intersexual and intrasexual mating strategies. *Ethology and Sociobiology*, *12*(5), 345–364.