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Avoiding entangling commitments: Tactics for implementing a short-term mating strategy

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ABSTRACT

The successful pursuit of a short-term mating strategy requires avoiding entangling commitments or unwanted, encumbering relationships. Two studies, based on an act-nomination and reported act performance methodologies, were conducted on samples of American college students to explore how individuals avoid entangling commitments. In Study 1 ($N = 102$) we identified the acts individuals use to avoid entangling commitments in the context of short-term mating. In Study 2 ($N = 298$) we examined reported usage of these tactics, and identified correlations with personality traits previously implicated in the pursuit of a short-term mating strategy (e.g., narcissism, mate-value). Personality traits such as the Dark Triad and sociosexuality, as well as mate-value, were positively correlated with tactics used to avoid entangling commitments. Results document how short-term mating strategists solve the problem of avoiding entangling commitments, reveal sex differences previously undiscovered, and highlight personality characteristics linked to solving this adaptive problem.

0. Introduction

Human mating strategies come in a wide variety but tend to range from short-term relationships characterized by relatively little commitment to long-term relationships characterized by heavy commitment (Buss & Schmitt, 1993; Gangestad & Simpson, 2000). Each relationship-type poses different adaptive problems for individuals. Those engaging in long-term mating face adaptive problems such as mate-retention (Kaighobadi, Shackelford, & Buss, 2010) and creating and rearing offspring (Buss, 2006; Trivers, 1972). More is known about adaptations to solve the suite of problems associated with long-term than short-term mating. This may be a function of the considerable social pressures placed on individuals to engage in long-term mateships (McDonald, 1995). Despite these pressures, some individuals, for some period of their life, engage in some form of casual sex (e.g., Jonason, Li, & Richardson, 2010). When they do so, they face obstacles or adaptive problems that must be solved for successful enactment of this mating strategy.

Much is known about why individuals engage in short-term mateships (Greiling & Buss, 2000). For instance, men and women may engage in short-term mating to test the waters regarding the compatibility of the pair for a more serious relationship. Men may seek low cost sexual access or attempt to increase their status in the eyes of their peers. Women sometimes use short-term mating to assess their mate-value, create paternity uncertainty (no conscious intent implied), or switch mates. There is even some detail about the ways individuals effectively attract short-term mates (Schmitt & Buss, 1996). For instance, mate-poaching may be one way of engaging in sexual relationships with a partner who is currently unavailable for longer-term relationships (Schmitt & Buss, 2001). Unfortunately, we know virtually nothing about the tactics that individuals implement to pursue a short-term mating strategy. That is, we have some idea of the *why* but not the *how* of executing a short-term mating strategy. The present studies were conducted as first steps to fill this gap.

A cardinal adaptive problem both sexes have to solve when short-term mating is avoiding entangling commitments that would interfere with the successful implementation of this strategy (Buss, 2003). We expected that avoiding entangling commitments would be composed of two adaptive, higher-order tasks (Eysenck, 1981). Individuals who wish to maintain a short-term mating style may have to (1) avoid the relationship escalating to one of a committed nature while simultaneously and (2) maintaining sexual access for the duration of the short-term relationship. Therefore, we predict that a two-dimensional model of these acts will fit the tactical data better than a one-dimensional model will.

Although men and women may share the same overarching problem in short-term mating, the manner in which they solve it may differ as a function of their different sexual psychologies. These differences have been linked to asymmetries in reproductive biology (Buss & Schmitt, 1993; Symons, 1979; Trivers, 1972). Men and women face different adaptive problems when it comes to short-term mating. The primary problem faced by men is finding willing partners and in response, men have evolved a desire for

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sexual variety (Symons, 1979). In contrast, the primary problem women face is becoming pregnant with the offspring of a low quality mate and in response women tend to place an increased emphasis on the genetic quality (e.g., facial symmetry) of her short-term mates (Gangestad & Simpson, 2000).

Such asymmetries in sexual psychologies lead us to make a number of predictions. Because women are often in a good bargaining position when it comes to the short-term mating market (Symons, 1979), they can act strategically to secure various benefits from short-term mating (Meston & Buss, 2009). Relative to men, women are likely to try to minimize escalation through avoiding contact, intimacy, and avoiding integration into one's life. These tactics may be ones men cannot afford to do, being less valuable (on average) in the short-term mating market. These tactics may undermine successful mating by advertising undesirable mate qualities (Buss, 2003). Similarly, women may not pay as heavy a cost for stating that she wants the relationship to be casual than men do and thus women should be more likely to report the usage of this tactic. Men who overtly express short-term intent may lose out mating opportunities by advertising an undesirable aspect of their personality. Women can more easily find a man willing to have sex with her, but perhaps not one willing to commit to her.

We hypothesized that implementing a short-term mating strategy would be facilitated by having personality traits that are related to the engagement in short-term mating relationships. For instance, those who have high mate-value (Kirsner, Figueredo, & Jacobs, 2003) are those who can afford to keep relationships purely casual more than can those lower in mate-value. With higher mate-value comes more opportunities to mate and, therefore, the relative risk associated with minimizing escalation and keeping the relationships sexual with any one partner away are lessened. In contrast, because sociosexuality (Simpson & Gangestad, 1991) taps individuals' attitudes, behaviors, and desires surrounding engaging in casual sex we expect it to be correlated with the use of tactics for avoiding entangling commitments. Because the Dark Triad traits – narcissism, psychopathy, and Machiavellianism – are related to a manipulative approach to mating that does not incorporate long-term mateships (Jonason, Li, Webster, & Schmitt, 2009); we expect scores on the Dark Triad traits to be positively correlated with minimizing escalation and keeping the relationship sexual. Descriptively speaking, we include a measure of the Big Five because the personality variables captured by the five-factor model have been linked with aspects of human mating strategies such as number of sexual partners (i.e., extraversion) and sexual infidelity (i.e., low conscientiousness) to name two (Buss, 2003; Eysenck, 1981).

1. Study 1

1.1. Identifying the acts associated with avoiding entangling commitments

The goal of Study 1 was to identify the diverse acts that individuals perform for the goal of avoiding entangling commitments in the context of short-term mating. For this purpose, we used an act-nomination procedure (Buss & Craik, 1983) that has been successfully used for identifying the diverse ways in which individuals solve other adaptive problems of mating such as mate-retention (Buss, 1988), intersexual and intrasexual deception (Tooke & Camire, 1991), and mate-poaching (Schmitt & Buss, 2001).

2. Method

2.1. Participants and procedures

One hundred two (67% female) participants, with a mean age of 23.97 (*SD* = 6.45, *range* = 18–48; 48% single) from the Southwestern US took part in this study in exchange for extra credit in their psychology class. Data were gathered through an online data-collection instrument that prohibited multiple participants from the same IP address. Participants were presented with the following description.

> "People pursue a variety of mating strategies. Some seek long-term committed romantic relationships. Others seek short-term sexual encounters without commitment or entanglements. We are interested in how people who pursue short-term sexual encounters AVOID becoming entangled in unwanted commitments with their sex partners."

Then participants were presented with the following instructions. "Please think of people you know who have pursued short-term sexual encounters (this could include yourself, your friends, or anyone you know). In the spaces below, please describe specific means or actions by which they avoid unwanted commitments or entanglements with their short-term sexual partners. These could be specific acts, tactics, or strategies. Please be as specific as possible."

3. Results and discussion

A full list of the 71 acts can be obtained from the first author. The qualitative nature of the acts ranged greatly from acts of brutal agency to passive inaction. Examples of the former are acts of verbal or physical abuse, presumably designed to drive the person away. Interestingly, these abusive acts violate the desires that most people place on qualities such as kindness (Buss, 2003). At the other end of the spectrum are acts of inaction, such as avoiding sending emails or texts and avoiding locations in which the person might be present. In between inaction and abusive action are acts designed to minimize intimacy, minimize integration in personal social networks, and keep the relationship purely sexual. Acts of minimizing intimacy include avoiding cuddling, emotional affection, deep conversation, and keeping conversations superficial. Acts of minimizing social integration include failing to introduce the person to friends and family. Acts designed to keep the relationship purely sexual include flirting with others, talking about sexual experiences with others, and being blunt that the actor is only seeking short-term sex. These 71 acts served as the basis for Study 2.

4. Study 2

4.1. Reported act-usage for avoiding entangling commitments

In Study 2, we assessed each participant's reported usage of acts to avoid entangling commitments. In addition, because the acts appeared to cluster naturally into phenotypically similar tactics, we clustered the acts into tactics for reportorial economy. Then we tested for sex differences and personality correlates of these groupings.

5. Method

5.1. Participants and procedure

Two hundred ninety-eight (53% female) undergraduates, with a mean age of 22.84 (*SD* = 5.49, *range* = 18-59; 51% single) at a mid-sized university in the Southeastern US received extra credit for their participation. Data were gathered as they were in Study 1. Participants from Study 1 were excluded from participating.

5.2. Measures

The manner in which individuals maintain a short-term mating style was assessed with the 71 items gathered in Study 1. Participants received the following instructions.

In the course of our lives, we may be presented with individuals who would like to engage in serious, romantic relationships with us. However, for whatever reason, we may not want to engage in a long-term relationship with that person and, instead, would prefer to keep that relationship of a more casual nature. Below we would like you to report on the rates to which you use a series of tactics to avoid getting entangled into serious relationships. We understand that you currently might not be in this situation and ask that you attempt to imagine yourself in that situation to answer those questions if you need to.

Participants were asked to "Tell us the rates you use these tactics with the scale provided (1 = *not at all*; 5 = *extremely*)." Exploratory Factor Analyses revealed a murky multidimensional structure so we adopted a modified (i.e., we assessed internal consistency) Thematic Analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) to reduce the number of variables in our analyses and to create some coherency in the strategies and tactics used. These items were separately sorted by two research assistants and the first author into face-valid groupings (Bulmer, 1979). Where disagreement arose, the three discussed the categories. The acts were treated as surface traits that reflected latent tactics, and the latent tactics reflected a further, higher-order set of two strategies as done in prior work (Shackelford, Goetz, & Buss, 2005), presented in Tables 2 and 3. Using composites should reduce Type 1 error relative to item-analyses. More detail on the different composites can be obtained by contacting the first author.

5.2.1. Mate-value

We used the Mate-value Inventory (Kirsner et al., 2003). It is composed of twenty-two items that were averaged to function as an index of participants' mate-value (α = .88). A sample item asks the agreement (1 = *not at all*, 5 = *very much*) with the statement: I am a person with a good sense of humor.

5.2.2. Dispositional mating strategy

We assessed mating orientation with the seven-item Sociosexuality Orientation Index (SOI; Simpson & Gangestad, 1991); however, following recent advancements in understanding the measurement and structure of the SOI (e.g., Webster & Bryan, 2007), we scored it as three[1] subscales: *behaviors* (Items 1–3, α = .68), *attitudes* (Items 5–7, α = .80), and *desire* (Item 4). Participants responded to questions like "I can imagine myself being comfortable and enjoying casual sex with different partners". The count items were normalized with a log-transformation and all the items were standardized (*z*-scored), and averaged together respectively.

5.2.3. Five factors of personality

To measure the Big Five, we used the TIPI (Gosling, Rentfrow, & Swann, 2003), a short, 10-item measure that asks two questions for each dimension. Participants were asked, for instance, how much (1 = *not at all*; 5 = *very much*) they think of themselves as "extraverted, enthusiastic" and "quiet, reserved" (reverse-coded) as measures of extraversion. Estimates of internal consistency returned low rates: extraversion (α = .64), agreeableness (α = .32), conscientiousness (α = .38), emotional stability (α = .52), and openness (α = .27) as expected in short-scales (Kline, 2000) and as noted by the scale authors themselves.

[1] A three-factor model of the SOI fit the data well, $\chi^2(12) = 39.33$, $p < .01$; NFI = .94, CFI = .96; RMSEA = .088, 90% CI [.058,.119], $p_{\text{close fit}} = .02$. In contrast, a single-factor model of the SOI fit the data poorly, $\chi^2(14) = 111.02$, $p < .01$; NFI = .84, CFI = .85; RMSEA = .15, 90% CI [.13,.18], $p_{\text{close fit}} < .01$. Thus, the three-factor model fit the data significantly better than single-factor one, $\Delta\chi^2(2) = 71.69$, $p < .01$; ΔNFI = .10.

5.2.4. Dark Triad traits

Antisocial personality traits were assessed using the 12-item Dark Triad Dirty Dozen measure (Jonason & Webster, 2010). Participants were asked how much they agreed (1 = *not at all*, 5 = *very much*) with statements such as: "I tend to want others to admire me"; "I tend to lack remorse"; and "I have used deceit or lied to get my way." Items were averaged together to create indexes of narcissism (α = .86), Machiavellianism (α = .84), and psychopathy (α = .83).

6. Results and discussion

At a conceptual level, we anticipated the successful pursuit of a short-term mating strategy would be facilitated by solving two related, but somewhat distinct, adaptive problems – avoiding commitments that might lead to long-term involvement while simultaneously keeping the relationship purely sexual in nature. In order to test this notion, we created two confirmatory factor models. The first model was a one-factor model composed of all of the tactics (which reflect averaged usage of acts) used to keep the relationship casual in nature. This model fit the data poorly (see Table 1). In contrast, the two-factor model proved to be a superior fit.

6.1. Sex differences

In Table 2, we present sex differences at the strategy-level and tactic-level for avoiding commitment (top panel) and the strategy of keeping the relationship sexual in nature (bottom panel). Women were more likely than men were to minimize escalation to a long-term relationship but the sexes were equal in their tendencies to keep the relationship sexual in nature. At the tactic level, women were more likely than men were to be direct about the nature of the relationship, avoiding non-sexual contact, avoiding emotional intimacy, and avoiding integrating the person into your life. The sexes did not differ in the use of the tactic of blaming alcohol, being abusive, and being openly promiscuous.

At the level of individual acts, women scored higher than men did (t's = 2.00–3.99, p's < .05, Cohen's d's = 0.23–0.46) on items such as *avoiding the person*, *giving the wrong number*, *using text messaging and not talking on the phone*, *avoiding the word "love", avoiding holding hands*, and *not bringing the person home*. In contrast, when it came to keeping the relationship sexual in nature, men scored higher than women did (t's = −2.36 to −3.83, p's < .05, d's = −0.27 to −0.47) on items such as *keeping the conversation sexual in nature*, *having sex with someone else*, *maintaining multiple sex partners*, and *being promiscuous* (t's = 2.40–3.00, p's < .05, d's = 0.28–0.35).

6.1.1. Personality and avoiding entangling commitments

Next, we correlated personality traits conceptually related to mating strategies with strategies and tactics of avoiding entangling commitments. Table 3 shows correlations between these strategies and tactics with the Big Five of personality, the Dark Triad, mate-value, and sociosexuality. The Big Five proved unrelated to the use of these strategies and their related tactics. The only pattern occurred for the tactic of partner-directed violence, which was reported to be used more by those low on agreeableness, conscientiousness, and openness.

The Dark Triad of personality, particularly narcissism and Machiavellianism, were correlated with the reported usage of many tactics and strategies. Sociosexual attitudes, behaviors, and desires were generally correlated with the same tactics, except that sociosexual desires was positively correlated with openly declaring a short-term mating style. Those with higher mate-value tended to report using all tactics and strategies at high frequencies, except

Table 1
Relative fit indexes from two confirmatory factor analyses accounting the variance in the performance of acts individuals use to avoid entangling commitments.

Model	χ^2	*df*	$p \leqslant$	χ^2/df	CFI	TLI	RMSEA	% CI	p_{close}	SRMR
One-factor	164.83	14	.001	11.77	.885	.828	.190	[.165,.217]	.00	.083
Two-factor	106.43	13	.001	8.19	.929	.885	.155	[.129,.183]	.00	.075
Difference	58.40	1	.001							

Table 2
Sex differences in the performance of strategies and tactics to avoid entangling commitments.

Variables	Mean (SD)			*t*	*d*
	Overall	Females	Males		
Minimizing escalation to long-term relationship (α = .96; 4 tactics)	2.97 (0.93)	3.09 (0.89)	2.83 (0.95)	2.44*	0.28
Partner directed violence (α = .81; 2 acts)	1.46 (0.83)	1.47 (0.86)	1.44 (0.79)	0.40	0.04
Avoid contact (α = .94; 13 acts)	3.03 (1.07)	3.18 (1.05)	2.87 (1.08)	2.53*	0.29
Avoid intimacy (α = .95; 25 acts)	3.29 (1.01)	3.42 (0.94)	3.14 (1.07)	2.43*	0.28
Avoid integration (α = .83; 4 acts)	3.22 (1.26)	3.39 (1.20)	3.04 (1.31)	2.35*	0.28
Keeping the relationship sexual in nature (α = .91; 3 tactics)	2.66 (1.00)	2.73 (0.97)	2.57 (1.02)	1.44	0.16
Reliance on alcohol as an excuse (α = .81; 3 acts)	2.27 (1.15)	2.34 (1.18)	2.19 (1.11)	1.12	0.13
Act in accordance with a short-term mating style (α = .83; 15 acts)	2.50 (1.07)	2.52 (1.06)	2.49 (1.09)	0.24	0.03
Declare a short-term mating style (α = .92; 9 acts)	3.00 (1.27)	3.15 (1.27)	2.84 (1.26)	2.11*	0.25

Note: Strategies in boldface-type; *d* is Cohen's *d*.
* $p < .05$.

Table 3
Correlates of performance of strategies/tactics to avoid entangling commitments.

Variables	Personality correlates											
	E	A	C	ES	O	N	M	P	SOIB	SOIA	SOID	MVI
Strategies												
Minimizing escalation to long-term relationship	.06	.01	.11	.11	.06	0.34**	0.31**	.14*	.04	−.06	.08	.28**
Keeping the relationship sexual in nature	.11	−.07	−.07	.02	.08	.37**	.36**	.20**	.15**	.14*	.25**	.19**
Tactics												
Partner directed violence	−.11	−.15**	−.19**	−.06	−.19**	.22**	.25**	.29**	.10	.03	.05	−.02
Avoid contact	.05	.04	.12*	.09	.06	.32**	.28**	.10	.04	−.06	.09	.24**
Avoid intimacy	.10	.02	.13*	.14*	.10	.30**	.28**	.11	.03	−.06	.06	.29**
Avoid integration	.03	.02	.07	.06	.08	.27**	.27**	.14*	.01	−.04	.02	.20**
Reliance on alcohol as an excuse	.07	−.13*	−.10	−.13*	.03	.41**	.32**	.21**	.23**	.20**	.18**	.16**
Act in accordance with a short-term mating style	.15	−.11	−.09	.05	.08	.38**	.41**	.26**	.20**	.18**	.27**	.15*
Declare a short-term mating style	.06	.02	−.01	.06	.07	.21**	.22**	.08	.03	.03	.17**	.18**

Notes: E = extraversion, A = agreeableness, C = conscientiousness, ES = emotional stability, O = openness, N = narcissism, M = Machiavellianism, P = psychopathy, SOIB = sociosexual behaviors, SOIA = sociosexual attitudes, SOID = sociosexual desire; MVI = mate-value.
* $p < .05$.
** $p < .01$.

for partner-directed violence, for which the correlation did not differ significantly from zero.

6.1.2. Sex differences in personality correlates

Tests for moderation by the sex of the participant were conducted using Fisher *z*-test. Few were significant. Associations with antisocial personality traits evidenced some moderation by participants' sex. Psychopathy interacted with participants' sex ($z = 2.11$, $p < .05$) to predict the tactic of *acting openly promiscuous*. The correlation was present in women ($r = .39$, $p < .05$) but not men ($r = .16$, *ns*). The opposite pattern was observed in Machiavellianism. Machiavellianism interacted with participants' sex ($z = -2.31$, $p < .05$) to predict the tactic of *avoiding integrating the person into your life*. The correlation was more strongly positive in men ($r = .41$, $p < .05$) than in women ($r = .16$, $p < .05$).

Emotional stability interacted with participants' sex to predict both the strategies of minimizing escalation to a long-term relationship ($z = -2.16$, $p < .05$) and keeping the relationship sexual in nature ($z = -1.78$, $p < .05$), as well as with the tactics of *avoiding nonsexual contact* ($z = -2.59$, $p < .01$), *declaring short-term mating style* ($z = -1.88$, $p < .05$), and *avoiding intimacy* ($z = -2.00$, $p < .05$). Emotional stability interacted with participants' sex ($z = 1.87$, $p < .05$) to predict the strategy of maintaining a sexual relationship. The correlation was present for women ($r = .17$, $p < .05$) and non-significant and in the opposite direction for men ($r = -.05$, *ns*).

Conscientiousness interacted with participants' sex ($z = -1.79$, $p < .05$) to predict the tactic of acting openly promiscuous ($r = -.20$, $p < .05$, for women; $r = .01$, *ns*, for men). Similar results were found with Sociosexual Behaviors ($z = -2.01$, $p < .05$), predicting the use of partner directed violence. The correlation was present in women ($r = .26$, $p < .05$) but not men ($r = .03$, *ns*).

7. General discussion

The successful pursuit of a short-term mating strategy entails solving adaptive problems that, if left unsolved, would impede its success. A fundamental impediment to successful short-term mating involves becoming encumbered with costly, unwanted relationship commitments. Consequently, we anticipated that people who pursue a short-term mating strategy would deploy tactics designed to avoid entangling commitments. We conducted two studies to explore this uncharted tactical domain.

How do people go about keeping a relationship in the "sex-zone" and out of the "commitment-zone"? Some tactics involved simple forms of inaction, such as ignoring the short-term partner, failing to respond to calls or messages, or cutting off communication after a sexual encounter. Others involve avoiding psychological or emotional intimacy, such as cuddling, affection, or the "relationship talk", which seem designed to prevent sending signals of long-term mating intent. Still others involve avoiding integrating the sex partner with one's social network of family and friends. Some reflect an honest declaration of interest in sex and nothing more, a blunt statement of a lack of interest in a long-term relationship, or letting the sex partner know that the actor is having sex with others. Others still, such as becoming verbally or physically abusive, seem designed to push the sex partner away by violating the mate preferences that most people have for mates who are kind and understanding (Buss, 2003). This pool of acts provides the first empirical documentation, to our knowledge, of the ways in which those pursuing a short-term mating strategy attempt to solve the problem of avoiding entangling commitments.

Study 2, revealed important sex differences and personality and mate-value correlates with self-reported act usage. Women, more than men, tended to use the tactics of contact avoidance, intimacy avoidance, and social network integration avoidance to prevent costly entanglements with short-term sex partners. These results raise interesting conceptual questions. Are women who avoid intimacy and social network integration with short-term partners doing so as part of a pure short-term mating strategy, or rather because they are eliminating particular men as viable long-term mating candidates? Stated differently, do women and men use these avoidance tactics for different functional reasons—for women, to avoid long-term mating with sub-optimal men, and for men, to remain unencumbered in order to pursue short-term mating?

In confirmation of our predictions, mate-value, the Dark Triad traits, and sociosexuality were correlated with strategies and tactics to avoid entangling commitments. We also included the Big Five in an exploratory fashion; we offer some interpretation of the results here. Overall, the Big Five were unrelated to either our strategy-level measures of avoiding entangling commitments. However, at the tactical level we observed some significant associations. For instance, agreeableness, conscientiousness, and openness were negatively correlated with the use of violence. Low score on these traits may indicate undesirable personality traits (Buss, 2003), and interpersonal violence may be one manifestation of embodying undesirable traits. Conscientiousness was associated with increased use of the tactics of avoiding intimacy and contact. Emotional stability was associated with increased use of the tactic of avoiding intimacy. Both agreeableness and openness were negatively associated with reliance on alcohol as an excuse. However, because the TIPI might not capture the heterogeneous constructs of the Big Five, the associated low levels of internal consistency, and the fact that none of the correlations with the Big Five factors exceeded .20, we urge caution in interpreting these results.

This study had four main limitations. First, Study 2 assessed self-reported usage of the acts to avoid entangling commitments. Future studies could use additional data sources, such as close-friend reports, to triangulate on the results discovered using self-reports. Second, we relied solely on college students. Although a college sample is appropriate given that this age group tends to be highly active in the mating arena, future studies could profitably examine commitment-avoidance tactics across a sample with a wider age range. Third, because this was the first study assessing this aspect of human mating psychology, we were willing to tolerate more Type I error and hence did not correct for multiple comparisons. Future work should take the results presented here further by subjecting them to more rigorous testing.

Avoiding entangling commitments defines a central adaptive problem that must be solved for the successful implementation of a short-term mating strategy. The current research makes a contribution to identifying the acts and tactics by which people solve this adaptive problem and links between personality traits and mate-value and the use of those tactics. Future research can build on this base, and in so doing contribute to a deeper understanding of human sexual strategies.

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