

### Original Article

## Indignation or insecurity: The influence of mate value on distress in response to infidelity

April Phillips, Department of Psychology, Columbus State University, Columbus, GA, USA. Email: [phillips\\_april2@colstate.edu](mailto:phillips_april2@colstate.edu).

**Abstract:** Two studies examined the influence of mate value on responses to infidelity from an evolutionary perspective. Couples were recruited for Study 1, allowing an examination of both participants' self-perceived mate value and their partners' mate value on reactions to hypothetical scenarios describing an incidence of infidelity. As predicted, higher levels of perceived mate value were associated with greater levels of indignation while lower levels of mate value were associated with increased levels of insecurity and anxiety in response to infidelity. In Study 2, participants who had been the victim of infidelity in the past recounted their experiences and reported how they actually responded. Consistent with Study 1, higher levels of mate value were associated with greater levels of indignation in response to infidelity whereas lower levels of mate value were associated with greater levels of insecurity. Taken together, these two studies provide compelling support for the hypothesis that the nature of the distress experienced in response to infidelity is influenced by an individual's perceived mate value.

**Keywords:** mate value, infidelity, mating, jealousy

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### Introduction

Our romantic relationships are some of the most rewarding and important relationships that most of us will ever experience. However, these same relationships can also be great sources of pain and anguish. One such source of extreme pain and betrayal would be discovering, after investing considerable time and effort in forming and maintaining a relationship with a significant other, that he or she has been unfaithful. Recent estimates of marital infidelity range from 26 to 70 percent for women and 33 to 75 percent for men (Shackelford and Buss, 1997a). Clearly, these estimates vary widely, partly due to the secretive nature of infidelity; however, even at the lower end, they represent a substantial risk and a large potential problem within romantic relationships.

Actual or suspected infidelity is the leading cause of spousal abuse and homicide, as well as the most frequently cited reason for divorce among married couples (Shackelford and Buss, 1997a). However, not all illicit affairs result in termination of the relationship. Many individuals choose instead to remain with their partners and work toward repairing the relationship (Shackelford, Buss, and Bennett, 2002). As a result, researchers have begun to explore the dynamics underlying our reactions to this potentially devastating event. Specifically, they have posed questions such as, “What factors influence the level of distress experienced following infidelity?” and “Under what conditions are the victims of infidelity likely to choose reconciliation and forgiveness over relationship dissolution?”

For example, numerous studies examining the influence of both gender and type of infidelity (emotional vs. sexual) have been conducted (for a review see Buss, 2000). Researchers have convincingly demonstrated that both of these variables matter in determining the overall levels of distress experienced following infidelity. Consistent with evolutionary predictions, men report greater levels of distress in response to sexual infidelity while women tend to be more distressed by emotional infidelity (Buss, Larsen, and Westen, 1996; Buss, Larsen, Westen, and Semmelroth, 1992). The majority of these studies have relied on the use of the single term “distress” or “upset” to assess jealousy (for a review see Harris, 2003). However, some theorists have questioned the construct validity of this measure (DeSteno, Bartlett, Braverman, and Salovey, 2002). In fact, previous work has shown that the phenomenological experience of jealousy is actually much more complex than simple distress, and may represent a constellation of related emotions such as anxiety, anger and hurt (Parrott and Smith, 1993). In differentiating jealousy from simple distress, emotion theorists have defined jealousy as an emotion experienced when a person is threatened by the loss of an important relationship to a rival (Parrott, 2001). Any loss or potential loss, however upsetting, that does not involve one’s partner beginning another relationship and/or engaging in sex with someone else should not result in jealousy. Thus, although jealousy most certainly involves a great deal of overall distress, it is entirely possible to feel distressed without feeling jealous. In addition, distress could mean a variety of things depending not only on the situation, but also on each individual’s interpretation of the term. It is logical to assume that emotional reactions to infidelity could potentially range from anger and hostility to sadness and even fear or anxiety, all of which would fall under the general term “distress.”

Perhaps using a term so broad has hindered researchers in their quest to understand the complexities of how individuals react to infidelity. It is not surprising that participants report high levels of overall distress in response to infidelity. In fact, several researchers have argued that this tendency for infidelity to be associated with high levels of distress creates an unavoidable problem with ceiling effects when using conventional continuous measures of jealousy or distress (Buss et al., 1996). One solution to this potential problem has been to employ a forced choice methodology in which participants are asked to choose the most upsetting (or distressing) option from two scenarios. For example, studies investigating gender differences in response to infidelity usually use one scenario describing sexual infidelity and one describing emotional infidelity (Buss et al., 1992). Proponents of this methodology argue that the forced choice format eliminates the concern with ceiling effects resulting from high levels of distress and allows the examination of

some important gender differences in responses to different types of infidelity (Buss et al., 1996).

Another potential solution to dealing with the high levels of overall distress participants report in response to infidelity is to expand the conceptualization of distress by assessing several specific emotions separately. As discussed above, jealousy is believed to represent a combination of related emotions such as anxiety, anger and hurt (Parrott and Smith, 1993). Thus, examining the specific emotions experienced in response to infidelity should provide a deeper understanding of the underlying processes driving our reactions to such events. In a preliminary study examining a variety of emotional reactions to infidelity, Shackelford, LeBlanc and Drass (2000) identified 15 different factors or categories of reactions ranging from the expected (e.g., hostile/vengeful and undesirable/insecure) to the less obvious (e.g., happy and content/relieved). It stands to reason that the specific emotions experienced in response to infidelity might vary across both situations and individuals and that the specific nature of the distress experienced could influence subsequent behavioral responses such as the decision of whether or not to end the relationship.

One such factor that might influence the nature of emotional reactions to infidelity and subsequent decisions regarding whether or not to dissolve the relationship is the mate value of the individuals involved. Evolutionary psychologists have defined mate value as an individual's overall attractiveness (physical and otherwise) as a potential spouse, relative to other potential spouses on the current "mating market" (Shackelford and Buss, 1997b). Mate value has been shown to be related to variables such as romantic jealousy (Brown and Moore, 2003), jealousy towards rivals (Dijkstra and Buunk, 1998), and predictions regarding the likelihood of infidelity (Buss and Shackelford, 1997). For example, using fluctuating asymmetry (FA) as a measure of mate value, Brown, and Moore (2003) found that asymmetrical individuals displayed higher levels of romantic jealousy. In regards to potential rivals, men reported higher levels of jealousy in response to a rival who was high in social dominance, physical dominance and social status. In contrast, women reported greater distress in response to rivals who were high in physical attractiveness (Dijkstra and Buunk, 1998). Finally, women who were married to men of higher relative mate value provided higher estimates of the likelihood that their husbands will have affairs in the next year (Buss and Shackelford, 1997). Although none of the above studies specifically examined the relationship between mate value and emotional reactions to actual infidelity, their results suggest that high mate value individuals might respond to infidelity differently than lower mate value individuals. Because they do not expect to be cheated on and an unfaithful partner represents a bad mating choice and the loss of better options, high mate value individuals might be more distressed than lower mate value individuals in response to infidelity. In one recent study, Jones, Figueredo, Dickey, and Jacobs (2007) examined the relationship between mate value and overall distress. Consistent with evolutionary theories, their results showed that higher mate value individuals did report higher levels of distress in response to infidelity. However, it is also possible that lower mate value individuals are not actually less distressed by infidelity, but rather experience a different set of emotions than higher mate value individuals. The current set of studies examined this possibility by assessing a variety of specific emotions separately rather than using a more general

measure of negative emotions or overall distress. It was hypothesized that because they do not expect to be cheated on and have given up other potentially valuable partners to remain in the current relationship, individuals higher in mate value will react to infidelity with anger and hostility (i.e., indignation). In contrast, individuals who are lower in mate value should experience distress in terms of anxiety and insecurity. These individuals have more to lose if the relationship were to end and may perceive the available alternatives as less attractive.

Although the above hypotheses are proposed in terms of an individual's own mate value, it is also possible that an individual's mate value relative to his or her partner's could be more effective in predicting reactions to infidelity. Previous work has shown that discrepancies in mate value within couples are associated with both relationship satisfaction and levels of jealousy (Shackelford and Buss, 1997b). Specifically, individuals with high mate value relative to their partners tend to be less satisfied with the relationship in general. This decrement in overall satisfaction is assumed to be related to the fact that the more valuable partner incurs a greater cost as a result of his or her involvement in the relationship. This cost generally comes from the loss of mating opportunities with more valuable partners. In effect, by remaining in the relationship, the higher value individual gives up opportunities to mate with more valuable individuals (Buss, 1994).

In contrast, individuals with a low mate value relative to their partner tend to demonstrate greater levels of insecurity, including romantic jealousy. An individual with lower mate value relative to his or her partner benefits by being in the relationship, and incurs the greatest cost if the relationship ends. Thus, he or she is motivated to maintain the status quo and should be particularly sensitive to cues indicating that the relationship might be in trouble (Buss, 1994). Due to the limited amount of research on this topic, the current set of studies examined the effects of an individual's own mate value as well as the effects of his/her partner's mate value on emotional reactions to infidelity.

### *Overview of the present studies*

The influence of mate value on emotional reactions to infidelity was examined in two studies. In study 1, couples reported how they would react in response to a hypothetical scenario describing a situation in which their partner had been sexually unfaithful. The use of couples in this study provided an opportunity to measure the mate value of both individuals involved in the relationship. This allowed an examination of the effects of an individual's mate value as well as his or her partner's mate value on reactions to the hypothetical infidelity scenarios. For the second study, participants who had been victims of infidelity within a past or current relationship described their experience and reported how they actually responded.

## **Study 1**

### **Materials and Methods**

#### *Participants*

Thirty-eight heterosexual couples enrolled at a large Midwestern university

participated in this study in exchange for partial course credit. Participants ranged in age from 18 to 28 years with an average age of 19.29 ( $SD = 1.76$ ). Most of the couples described their relationships as “dating” ( $n = 29$ ). Other categories included “living together” ( $n = 5$ ), “engaged” ( $n = 1$ ), and “married” ( $n = 3$ ). Their relationships ranged in length from just over one month (36 days) to about seven years (2,783 days) with a mean length of about two years ( $M = 707.17$  days;  $SD = 591.39$  days). Thirty of the 38 couples were currently sexually active. These 30 couples reported having sex an average of 2.30 times per week ( $SD = 2.17$ ).

### *Procedure*

Couples were scheduled for individual laboratory sessions conducted by two undergraduate research assistants (one man and one woman). Upon arriving at their scheduled session, each couple was given a brief overview of the study and allowed to read and sign an informed consent form. At this point, the couples were ushered into separate rooms by a same-gender research assistant for the remainder of the study and assured that each individual’s responses would be kept confidential from his or her partner.

As a measure of perceived mate value, participants were first asked to rate themselves and their partners on a variety of attributes that previous work has shown to be important in the mate selection process (e.g., “physically attractive,” and “ambitious/industrious”) (Buss, 1989; Buss and Barnes, 1986). The format and several of the items used for this measure were based on the Self Attributes Questionnaire (SAQ) developed by Pelham and Swann (1989). For this measure, participants were asked to rate themselves (and their partner) on each attribute relative to other students of the same age and sex on an 11-point scale ranging from 0 (“way BELOW average”) to 10 (“way ABOVE average”). Both versions of the final scale (self and partner) demonstrated excellent reliability ( $\alpha = .87$  and  $.86$ , respectively). A copy of the measure with instructions for rating one’s own mate value is included in Table 1. When rating their partners’ mate value, participants responded to the same items but were instructed to rate their partner relative to other CSU students of his or her sex and age.

Relative mate value (RMV) was calculated by subtracting each participant’s ratings of his or her partners’ mate value from his or her own mate value score (participants’ mate value – partners’ mate value). This provided a measure of each participant’s perceived mate value relative to his or her partner. Because this measure of RMV was calculated as a difference score, a score of 0 indicates no discrepancy between the participant’s perceptions of his or her own mate value and his or her partner’s mate value. A negative score would indicate that the participant felt that he or she was lower in mate value than his or her partner. In contrast, a positive score indicates that the participant perceives him or herself to be the higher value person in the relationship.

**Table 1.** Scale used to measure participants' perceptions of their own mate value

Below are several ways in which college students might describe themselves or others. For each characteristic, please *rate yourself relative to other CSU students of your sex and age* using the scale below.

0.....1.....2.....3.....4.....5.....6.....7.....8.....9.....10		
(0%) (10%) (20%) (30%) (40%) (50%) (60%) (70%) (80%) (90%) (100%)		
way BELOW		way ABOVE
average		average
1) Intelligent	6) Good common sense	11) Exciting personality
2) Socially skilled/competent	7) Popular	12) Healthy
3) Good athletic ability	8) Ambitious/industrious	13) Easygoing
4) Physically attractive	9) Good financial prospects	14) Creative
5) Good leadership ability	10) Kind and understanding	15) Good student/likely to graduate college

Next, participants were asked to imagine that their current partner had been sexually unfaithful and report how they would feel and/or respond in such a situation. The decision to focus only on sexual infidelity rather than emotional infidelity was made in order to control for differences in responses to the two types of infidelity. As discussed above, previous research has shown that men and women may respond differently to each type of infidelity (Buss et al., 1992); however, the purpose of this study was not to examine the influence of gender, but to explore the impact of mate value on reactions to infidelity. Thus, the scenario used in this study specifically described the alleged affair as a sexual one that did not include an emotional attachment. Participants were instructed to imagine that the following scenario had happened to them and report how they would respond.

“Imagine that over spring break your partner met someone else while he/she was out of town with friends. He/She admits to having sex with this person, but he/she did NOT fall in love with her/him. Since they did not make any plans to stay in touch, he will probably never see her/him again. He/She seems to regret his/her involvement with her/him and still wants to stay together with you.”

Rather than simply measuring overall distress, indignation and insecurity in response to the affair were assessed separately. Indignation was conceptualized as a combination of anger and hostility whereas insecurity was conceptualized as a combination of anxiety and insecurity. Participants reported the extent to which they would experience each of these four emotions on a 9-point Likert scale ranging from 0 (“not at all”) to 8 (“extremely”) (e.g., “To what extent would you feel angry with your partner?” and “To what extent would you feel anxious?”). From these individual ratings, two composite scores were created by averaging the scores for the relevant emotions. Both of these composite scales demonstrated acceptable reliability ( $\alpha = .68$  and  $.70$ , respectively). Finally, each couple was asked to provide basic demographic information about their

current relationship, including the length of the relationship, and whether or not they were currently sexually active.

**Results**

Descriptive statistics for the mate value measures (self, partner, and relative) and emotional reactions to the hypothetical affair (insecurity and indignation) are summarized in Table 2.

As shown in the table, participants reported high levels of both indignation ( $M = 6.52, SD = 1.77$ ) and insecurity ( $M = 5.95, SD = 2.06$ ) in response to the hypothetical affair scenarios indicating that their overall levels of distress were high. There were no gender differences in reported levels of mate value or indignation; however, the women did report higher levels of insecurity in response to the affair scenario than the men. For the women, there were no significant differences in levels of indignation versus insecurity ( $p > .05$ ); however, the men reported significantly higher levels of indignation compared to insecurity ( $p < .05$ ). There was also no significant correlation between levels of indignation and levels of insecurity ( $r = .21, p > .05$ ).

**Table 2.** Mean (*SD*) perceived mate value and emotional reactions to the infidelity scenario in Study 1

	Men	Women	Total
Perceived mate value (self)	6.58 (1.13)	6.63 (0.95)	6.61 (1.04)
Perceived mate value (partner)	6.78 (1.04)	7.11 (0.89)	6.95 (0.98)
Relative mate value	-0.20 (1.18)	-0.48 (0.82)	-0.34 (1.02)
Indignation	6.29 (1.69)	6.75 (1.84)	6.52 (1.77)
Insecurity	5.13 (2.04)*	6.76 (1.74)*	5.95 (2.06)

*Note:* \* Means within the same row differ significantly,  $p < .01$

Because the participants in this study were dating couples, their data are by definition not independent. In order to address this issue of non-independence, the relationships between perceived mate value and both of the predicted emotional reactions were examined using Hierarchical Linear Modeling (HLM) rather than traditional regression analysis (Raudenbush and Bryk, 2002). In order to examine both the influence of each individual participant’s own mate value and his or her partner’s mate value on reactions to the infidelity scenarios, the Actor-Partner Interdependence Model (APIM) proposed by Kashy and Kenny (2000) was employed. This approach models the effects of an individual’s independent variable score on his or her dependent variable score (the actor effect) and his or her partner’s dependent variable score (the partner effect) (Campbell and Kashy, 2002). These HLM models were also conducted controlling for the type of the relationship, and how frequently the couple reported having sex. As predicted, participants’ self-reported mate value was associated with levels of both indignation and insecurity. Participants who perceived themselves to be higher in mate value reported greater levels of indignation in response to the hypothetical infidelity ( $\beta = .60, p < .05$ ). In contrast, participants who perceived themselves to be lower in mate value, reported greater levels of

insecurity ( $\beta = -.58, p < .05$ ). An examination of partners' mate value revealed that the participants' ratings of their partners' mate value were not associated with either indignation or insecurity ( $\beta = .20, p > .05$  and  $\beta = .24, p > .05$ , respectively). However, an examination of relative mate value revealed that relative mate value was significantly associated with levels of insecurity ( $\beta = -.50, p < .05$ ), but not indignation ( $\beta = .45, p > .05$ ). Participants who rated themselves as lower in mate value than their partner reported higher levels of insecurity in response to the hypothetical affair.

## **Discussion**

As predicted, participants who were higher in mate value responded to the hypothetical scenarios with greater levels of indignation whereas those participants who were lower in mate value responded with greater levels of insecurity. The use of couples who were currently dating also allowed an examination of the influence of the participants' partners' mate value on reactions to infidelity. In the current study, partners' mate value was not a significant predictor of either indignation or insecurity; however, relative mate value was a significant predictor of insecurity. Participants who rated their own mate value as lower than their partners' reported higher levels of insecurity in response to the hypothetical affair. This finding is consistent with previous research showing that an individual's mate value relative to his or her partner predicts outcomes such as relationship satisfaction and jealousy better than his or her own mate value (Shackelford and Buss, 1997b). As discussed earlier, an individual who is lower in mate value than his or her partner effectively has more to lose if the relationship were to end and is therefore expected to be more sensitive to cues indicating potential problems (Buss, 1994). It makes sense that this heightened sensitivity would translate into higher levels of insecurity in the face of potential infidelity. In this case, feelings of insecurity appear to be influenced by both relative mate value and an individual's own mate value. In contrast, levels of indignation were only related to an individual's own mate value and not relative mate value. This is consistent with the work of Jones and colleagues (2007) who argued that higher mate value individuals are more upset by infidelity because they do not expect to be cheated on.

Although promising, these results are not without limitations. Specifically, there is a concern that the use of hypothetical infidelity scenarios in this study might have been problematic. Previous researchers have argued that participants' predictions of how they would respond to hypothetical scenarios might not correspond to actual behavior for a variety of reasons (e.g., Brown, 2003; Brown and Phillips, 2005; Gilbert, Lieberman, Morewedge, and Wilson, 2004). For example, research on the process of forgiveness has demonstrated that participants' predictions of whether or not they would forgive someone in response to a hypothetical scenario are confounded with their attitudes or beliefs about the value of forgiveness. In other words, participants who believe that forgiveness is a virtue and should be granted are more likely to predict that they would easily forgive a hypothetical offense; however, data based on alternative measures do not support the idea that individuals who place a high value on forgiveness will necessarily be more forgiving (Brown and Phillips, 2005). In order to address this concern, in the next study, participants who have experienced infidelity within a previous or current relationship were asked to

report how they actually responded to this incident. This allowed an examination of participants' actual responses to real-life situations. If participants' predicted responses to the hypothetical scenarios in Study 1 were accurate, then we should see similar relationships between mate value and indignation and insecurity when examining actual instances of infidelity.

In addition, the specific scenario chosen in this study may limit the generalizability of these results. For this study, participants responded to a scenario that described a relatively short-term sexual affair that was definitely over. Although the use of this scenario allowed an easy examination of reactions to one specific type of infidelity that many couples experience, it does not allow the examination of other potentially important variables such as the type of affair. Indeed, previous studies have shown that type of affair (sexual vs. emotional) is an important factor in predicting the responses of men and women to infidelity (Buss et al., 1992). Although this study was not designed to examine gender differences directly, the type of affair as well as the gender of the victim might be important factors to consider in addition to mate value. Because participants in Study 2 were reporting how they responded to an actual affair, we were able to collect information about participants' perceptions of whether the affair was purely sexual or included more emotional involvement and examine the effect that type of affair might have on reactions to infidelity.

## **Study 2**

### **Materials and Methods**

#### *Participants*

One hundred and two participants (69 women and 33 men) who reported having been the victim of infidelity while they were involved in a heterosexual relationship were recruited to participate in a study about their experiences. All participants were enrolled in introductory psychology at a large Midwestern university and received partial course credit in exchange for their participation. They ranged in age from 18 to 54 with an average age of 20.77 ( $SD = 3.96$ ) years. Most of the participants were sexually active at the time of the affair ( $n = 73$ ). About half of the participants reported having committed infidelity themselves ( $n = 44$ ).

#### *Procedure*

Individuals who participated in prescreening sessions held at the beginning of the semester and reported having been the victim of infidelity were contacted via email or phone and invited to participate in a study about romantic relationships. Upon arriving at their scheduled session, participants were first given a brief overview of the study and allowed to read and sign an informed consent form. Next, participants were asked to recall a time from their own life in which someone with whom they were romantically involved had been unfaithful or cheated on them and provide a brief description of this event. After taking a few minutes to recall the event, participants provided details about their relationship at the time the affair occurred, including the length and type of relationship

(“dating,” “living together,” “engaged,” or “married”) as well as the overall amount of time since the event occurred. Participants were also asked to report how close they felt to their partner prior to the affair using a 7-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (“not at all close”) to 7 (“very close”). Next, participants provided general details about the affair including whether or not the affair involved a sexual relationship, whether the affair was mainly a sexual one (e.g., a one night stand) or an emotional one (e.g., their partner was “in love” with the other person) and the level of emotional involvement. Emotional involvement was measured on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (“none – purely sexual”) to 7 (“my partner was deeply in love”). Participants were then asked to report how they felt immediately after the affair occurred. As in Study 1, two types of emotional reactions were assessed (indignation and insecurity). Perceived mate value was also measured using the same self-report scale described in Study 1. Ratings of the cheating partners’ mate value were not collected in this study due to the fact that such ratings would no doubt be confounded with such variables as the level of forgiveness following the affair and whether or not the relationship had ended. In Study 1, we were able to ask participants to rate their current partner before they imagined him or her cheating on them; thus, we were able to assess their perceptions of their partners’ mate value without worrying that the alleged infidelity would influence these ratings. However, since the affairs reported in Study 2 had already occurred, there was no way to ensure that these ratings would not be influenced by the affair itself and the aftermath. Finally, participants were asked to provide basic demographic information, including their current relationship status and whether or not they had ever committed infidelity while they were involved in a committed relationship with another person. All data was collected via an anonymous paper and pencil survey.

## **Results**

Most of the participants characterized their relationship at the time of the affair as “Dating” ( $n = 100$ ). Only 2 participants classified their relationships as more serious (“Living together,” “Engaged,” or “Married”). Participants also reported that they felt relatively close to their partners before the affair occurred ( $M = 4.88$ ,  $SD = 1.15$ ), and they had been involved in a relationship with this person for just over one year on average ( $M = 1.18$  years,  $SD = 0.90$ ). The affairs reported occurred an average of about 2 years prior to data collection ( $M = 2.19$  years,  $SD = 1.76$ ). Most of the participants classified the affair as “sexual” ( $n = 64$ ) and reported that their partner had actually had sex with the other person ( $n = 57$ ). In addition, they perceived that their partner had a low level of emotional commitment to the other person ( $M = 2.03$ ,  $SD = 1.69$ ). Most of the participants reported that the relationship ended as a direct result of the incident ( $n = 78$ ). At the time these data were collected, only 11 participants were still involved in a relationship with the person who had cheated on them.

Participants’ ratings of their mate value and emotional reactions to the reported instances of infidelity are summarized in Table 3. As in study 1, participants rated themselves relatively high in mate value and reported high levels of both indignation and insecurity in response to the affair. There were no gender differences in the reported levels of insecurity; however, the women reported higher levels of both self-perceived mate value

and indignation in response to the affairs. Consistent with the results of Study 1, levels of indignation and insecurity were not significantly correlated ( $r = .03, p > .50$ ).

**Table 3.** Mean (*SD*) perceived mate value and emotional reactions to the reported instance of infidelity in Study 2

	Men	Women	Total
Perceived Mate Value	6.19 (0.86)*	6.63 (0.71)*	6.49 (0.79)
Indignation	5.98 (1.38)*	6.70 (1.35)*	6.47 (1.39)
Insecurity	4.78 (1.69)	5.08 (1.97)	4.99 (1.88)

Note: \* Means within the same row differ significantly,  $p < .05$

In order to examine the influence of the participants' perceived mate value on their emotional reactions to the affairs, two separate regression analyses were conducted examining participants' gender, mate value, type of affair (sexual or emotional) and the overall level of emotional involvement on levels of indignation and insecurity. As predicted, participants who perceived themselves to be higher in mate value reported greater levels of indignation in response to the affair ( $\beta = .23, p < .05$ ) whereas those participants who perceived themselves to be lower in mate value reported greater levels of insecurity ( $\beta = -.24, p < .05$ ). Neither type of affair nor the level of perceived emotional involvement was significant predictors of either indignation or insecurity,  $p$ 's  $> .10$ . Gender was significantly related to indignation ( $\beta = -.21, p < .05$ ), but not insecurity ( $\beta = -.14, p < .05$ ). The women in this study reported higher levels of indignation than the men.

## Discussion

Consistent with the results in Study 1, participants in this study who perceived themselves to be high in mate value reported greater levels of indignation in response to an unfaithful partner, whereas participants who perceived themselves to be lower in mate value reported greater levels of insecurity. The type of affair and the overall level of emotional involvement were not related to either indignation or insecurity. Although the methods used in this study provide a "real world" complement to the hypothetical scenarios used in Study 1, this study is not without limitations of its own. First, because most of the participants were no longer involved in a relationship with the offending partner, we were not able to collect information about the partners' mate value in order to confirm the finding in Study 1 that insecurity in response to infidelity is influenced by both an individual's own mate value and his or her mate value relative to his or her partners. However, the results in Study 1 do suggest that the reliance on each participant's own mate value in this study is a valid approach since this variable was associated with both insecurity and indignation. Second, relying on participants' retrospective memories of past experiences might be problematic, especially for such an emotionally laden topic as infidelity. This potential problem is especially relevant for this study given that most of the affairs reported occurred more than a year prior to data collection. With so much time lapsing between the actual event and the recollection and reporting of that event, it is at least possible that participants' memories were inaccurate or influenced by other factors

such as hindsight bias. However, despite these limitations, the current study, in conjunction with the first study, provides compelling support for the hypothesis that mate value is an important predictor of reactions to an unfaithful partner.

## **General Discussion**

Both of these studies taken together provide consistent support for the prediction that an individual's mate value is an important factor in predicting emotional responses to infidelity within romantic relationships. In both studies, higher levels of mate value were associated with increased levels of indignation while lower levels of mate were associated with increased levels of insecurity. Interestingly, only insecurity and not indignation appears to be influenced by an individual's mate value relative to his or her partner. These differences in the type of emotional response as a function of mate value suggest some interesting hypotheses about actual responses to an unfaithful mate. As discussed earlier, not all illicit affairs result in the termination of the relationship (Shackelford et al., 2002). The current findings regarding the influence of mate value suggest one explanation for why certain individuals are able to forgive their partners and choose to work towards reconciliation rather than ending the relationship following infidelity. As discussed by Finkel, Rusbult, Kumashiro, and Hannon (2002), the current literature examining forgiveness has focused on *how* people forgive, whereas few studies have addressed the complementary issue of *why* people forgive. In response to this deficit, Finkel et al. (2002) examined forgiveness in romantic relationships within the context of interdependence, linking forgiveness to levels of commitment. Specifically, their results indicated that the link between commitment and forgiveness appears to be driven more by a simple intent to persist in the relationship rather than a long-term orientation or psychological attachment (Finkel et al., 2002). In this case, intent to persist was conceptualized as a decision to remain dependent on one's partner. Individuals who have invested a great deal in their relationship and perceive poor alternatives report greater intent to persist. In effect, they remain committed to their partner because they need the relationship. As discussed above, individuals with lower mate value incur greater costs if the relationship ends. In other words, they need the relationship, and therefore, should report greater levels of intent to persist.

The concept of mate value fits nicely into this framework of interdependence, providing one more piece to the puzzle of *why* individuals might forgive an intimate relationship partner following a serious betrayal such as infidelity. Individuals who are higher in mate value might be motivated by their increased levels of indignation to break up with the offending partner and seek an alternative to the current relationship rather than work toward forgiveness and reconciliation. As a consequence of their higher mate value, these individuals should have no problem locating and attracting another high value partner. Thus, based on a cost to benefit analysis, the most adaptive choice would be to cut their losses and find a more reliable, faithful partner. In contrast, individuals who are lower in mate value, especially those whose mate value is lower than their current partners' have more to lose if the relationship ends. Due to their lower mate value, their alternatives to the current relationship are limited. Thus, it might make more sense for them to try and salvage

the current relationship. Feelings of anxiety and insecurity in response to an affair might motivate these individuals to cling to their current relationship and facilitate the processes of forgiveness and reconciliation. The investigation of outcomes such as forgiveness, reconciliation and dissolution are promising areas for future research. If the above hypotheses are true, then not only should mate value predict these outcomes, but the outcomes might be mediated by levels of indignation and insecurity. In other words, the emotional reaction of indignation should motivate individuals to end the relationship and discourage forgiveness while feelings of insecurity and anxiety should promote forgiveness and reconciliation by motivating the victim to hang on to the current relationship.

Future research could also expand this work by examining the role of apologies in the forgiveness process following infidelity. Previous work has demonstrated that apologies, particularly from close relationship partners, are associated with higher levels of forgiveness in response to a variety of interpersonal offenses (Brown, Phillips, and Barnes, 2004; McCullough, Pargament, and Thoresen, 2000). Thus, one would expect that sincere apologies following infidelity will be associated with higher levels of forgiveness. However, it is also possible that apologies might interact with other variables such as mate value. For example, individuals lower in mate value relative to their partners may be more likely to forgive an unfaithful partner only if he or she offers a sincere apology. These individuals could be predisposed to grant forgiveness more readily, yet still need an apology as justification that forgiveness is an appropriate response.

Although the results of these two studies are intriguing and promising, they are not without some important limitations. First, there are valid concerns about whether using a college age sample is appropriate when assessing reactions to infidelity. College students tend to have limited experience with romantic relationships, especially the long-term relationships within which infidelity would be most relevant. One has to wonder whether a more representative sample of individuals would respond in the same way. In addition, most of the “affairs” reported by participants in Study 2 occurred at least one year earlier when the majority of these participants were still in high school. This raises the concern that the types of infidelity reported by these participants may be qualitatively different from what is experienced by older individuals involved in long-term committed relationships. However, despite these concerns, the results presented here are promising. Future work should include samples of older individuals. It would be particularly interesting to expand these results to individuals who are married with and without children.

Although each study by itself has some limitations, together, they provide a compelling story about the influence that mate value has on determining how individuals respond when their partner has been unfaithful. The first study provides a great deal of experimental control and allows for an examination of the effects of each individual’s mate value in relation to the value of his or her partner. The second study, in contrast, addresses some of the concerns about the ecological validity of the hypothetical scenarios used in Study 1 by examining responses to actual affairs that occurred in the “real world.” Although certainly not conclusive, the results of both studies suggest that mate value is associated with responses to infidelity in the direction predicted by evolutionary theories.

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