



Call Me Daddy: How Long-term Desirability Is Influenced by Intention for Fatherhood

Ryan C. Anderson^{1,2} · Michele K. Surbey¹

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Abstract

One of the most important decisions an individual can make involves investing in a mating relationship. For women, the process of mate selection can be time-intensive and fraught with costs and dangers. However, these risks can be minimised by attending to relevant social information and modelling the mate choices of others. The propensity of imitating another's mate choices is referred to as mate copying. Most research has focused on this behaviour in non-humans, but evidence of its existence in humans is emerging. The current study sought to determine conditions that modify a man's desirability. The present study examined 267 women's evaluations of men depicted in silhouetted images who varied in terms of their intentions for fatherhood and relationship history. Results showed that a man's desirability as a long term mate was enhanced if he wished to become a father, and/or if he had a previous relationship experience, indicating he had been formerly chosen or preferred. These findings add to the existing body of knowledge on mate copying and attention to social information by demonstrating how women incorporate social learning and innate evolutionary predispositions to facilitate decision-making and behaviour relating to mate selection.

Keywords Mate copying · Fatherly intention · Desirability · Mate poaching · Attractiveness

We, the authors, hereby confirm that this manuscript has not been published elsewhere and is not currently under consideration elsewhere.

Highlights

- When making a decision about who to romantically partner with, both women and men should pay attention to any cheaply available social information they can access.
- By indicating that he wishes to be a father, a man greatly increases his desirability to women.
- By indicating that he has had a relationship experience, a man greatly increases his desirability to women.
- By showing women vignettes with silhouetted images, this study demonstrates people strongly attend to social information when making mate-relevant decisions.

✉ Ryan C. Anderson
ryan.anderson1@monash.edu

Michele K. Surbey
mksurbey@gmail.com

¹ Department of Psychology, College of Healthcare Sciences, James Cook University, 1 University Drive, Douglas, QLD 4814, Australia

² Present address: School of Psychological Sciences, Faculty of Medicine, Nursing, & Health Sciences, Monash University, Wellington Road, Clayton, VIC 3800, Australia

Romantic relationships are significantly consequential, not only from a biological or genetic perspective, but also a social one. Hence, understanding relationship formation, maintenance and dissolution would seem of considerable importance. Although knowledge of these processes could hold great utility (Price & Vandenberg, 1980), it is presently sub-optimal in a number of dimensions.

The Importance of High Parental Investment

The idea of *differential reproductive success* is important in understanding how the males of many species are affected by female choice, leading to the evolutionary process of sexual selection. A male's reproductive success is not limited by his ability or capacity to produce low metabolic-cost sex cells, but rather by his ability to attract mates and fertilise eggs. In contrast, females produce larger more metabolically costly gametes, and their reproductive success is limited by their ability to produce them rather than attract mates and reproduce. As a result of these basic differences in the cost of producing gametes, it is widely accepted that mating activities are more costly

for females (female choosiness) and that males are less discriminating in selecting mates than females.

Parental investment is defined by Trivers (1972) as ‘any investment by the parent in an individual offspring that increases the offspring’s chance of surviving (and hence reproductive success) at the cost of the parent’s ability to invest in other offspring’ (p. 139). Under this definition, parental investment includes both the specific initial metabolic contribution to sex cells and any subsequent investment broadly benefitting one’s offspring (feeding, protecting, nurturing etc.). Trivers argued that the sex whose parental investment is greater will become the limiting resource. It follows that they will be more highly sought after, and thus competed for, by members of the lesser-investing sex. Due to the gender asymmetry in initial metabolic contributions to sex cells and the ongoing obligate parental investment in humans (female gestation, lactation, parental care etc.), it is clear that men’s average parental investment is necessarily lower than women’s average parental investment (Kenrick et al., 1990). As in many other species, female humans are more discriminating in choosing mates than males. Moreover, the basis on which the two sexes choose partners varies somewhat.

Research on gender differences has consistently indicated that whereas men highly prize readily observable characteristics, such as physical beauty in a female partner (Buss, 1989; Buss & Barnes, 1986; Singh, 1993; Singh & Young, 1995; Symons, 1992; Townsend & Wasserman, 1998; Walster et al., 1966; Weeden & Sabini, 2005), women are far more concerned with a man’s socioeconomic status (SES), parental ability and capacity for the acquisition of resources among other things (Barber, 1995; Buss, 1989; Kenrick & Keefe, 1992; Shackelford et al., 2005; Singh, 1995; Wood & Eagly, 2002). Such qualities are strongly related to a man’s ability to provide nourishment and protection to his mate and their offspring. A comprehensive synthesis of studies examining gender preferences in mate selection supports the fact that both SES and ambitiousness (but not character, intelligence, humour or personality) are extremely important to women but not men (Feingold, 1992). These qualities, while indirectly assessing a man’s *capacity* to provide, neglect to indicate a measure of his *willingness* to provide. Although a number of studies have addressed the former, the latter (willingness, including a positive attitude toward children) has received less attention (but see Brase, 2006; La Cerra, 1995), yet it appears to be an integral component of the overall process of resource provision. Brase (2006) has suggested that the disposition of males, with specific regard to investing in their own children, is a crucial factor for women in making their relationship choices. Males indicating a capacity and/or willingness to ‘invest’ in their

own offspring would have a selective advantage over those males who do not.

Mate Copying and Mate Poaching

Because both sex itself and making a favourable mate-choice decision is potentially so consequential for women, any additional mate-relevant information that comes at a low cost would be very beneficial. The evaluation of a potential mate on any number of crucial domains is an important task, and any strategy that confers upon the chooser an informational advantage that comes at a sufficiently low cost should be selected for. One possible source of such low-cost information is knowing (and copying) the mate choices of other women (Anderson & Surbey, 2014). Therefore, the phenomenon of mate copying involves the chooser incorporating information about a potential romantic partner’s relationship history into his or her decision-making process.

By virtue of having been ‘chosen’ previously as a romantic partner, a man is conveying that he has at least some desirable mate-relevant characteristics that will possibly transfer across to subsequent relationships (Burch et al., 2021). He has effectively been *implicitly* approved as a romantic partner and should theoretically be more desirable than a man who has not. There have been empirical demonstrations of previously partnered men being perceived to be more desirable/attractive than men who have not been partnered (Gouda-Vossos et al., 2018; Rodeheffer et al., 2016). However, evidence concerning the relative desirability of currently partnered versus currently single men is inconsistent (Anderson & Surbey, 2014; Parker & Burkley, 2009).

There is also preliminary evidence that favourable *explicit* information offered by former romantic partners also serves to effectively enhance a man’s perceived desirability. Scammell and Anderson (2020) had the female former romantic partners of men offer *explicit* information about his mate quality (“He was a good partner”/“He was a bad partner”). While both significantly modified his perceived desirability to other women relative to when no information about his quality was presented (upwardly and downwardly, respectively), literature examining this aspect of *explicit* information is sparse.

The phenomenon of mate poaching is similar but distinct in that it strictly involves the pursuit of and eventual pairing with a currently romantically involved individual (Moran & Wade, 2022). Although the processes share features, there is reason to believe that previous studies reporting a demonstration of mate copying, may have actually been gauging a propensity more closely aligned with mate poaching (for a discussion see Anderson & Surbey, 2020; Gouda-Vossos et al., 2018). Therefore, it is important to distinguish these processes methodologically.

It is important to note here that in the current study the specific desirability gauged is long-term desirability. There are many reasons why mate copying occurs more frequently when seeking a long-term versus short-term mate (for a discussion see Anderson & Surbey, 2020), although many essentially come down to the type of information being sought. The information that can be discerned from knowing that a man has been partnered previously is more relevant for long-term mating decisions than it is for short-term mating decisions (Waynforth, 2007).

Goals and Hypotheses

The current study employed generic silhouetted representations of target men (similar to those employed by Anderson & Surbey, 2014), to test the following hypotheses:

1. Women will consider men professing intentions for fatherhood (as an indication of their willingness to invest in children) more romantically desirable than men indicating the opposite.
2. Having a former partner, versus having never been partnered, will enhance a single man's perceived long-term desirability, thus indicating a woman's propensity to mate copy.
3. Positive mate-relevant information concerning a single target male presented by a former female partner is expected to enhance his romantic desirability.
4. In a more exploratory vein, a final goal was to determine if women would find men with a current partner more desirable as long-term partners than single men with a former partner (indicating a propensity to mate poach).

Method

Participants

Participants were 267 heterosexual women from James Cook University (JCU) and the wider public under the age of 40 ($M = 21.73$ years, $SD = 5.42$ years). The targeted age-range was truncated for a number of reasons: women beyond the age of 40 may be outside their peak reproductive years and hence have decreased mate selection interest, and there is also evidence to suggest that mate copying is less prevalent in older, more experienced women (Anderson & Surbey, 2014; Bowers et al., 2011; Waynforth, 2007). Participant age distribution showed strong positive skew, with 81.6% of participants being 25 years of age or younger, while only 4.5% were 35 years of age or older. Participants were recruited from the JCU psychology research pool and through online media. Those studying an undergraduate psychology course

in either Australia or Singapore were awarded course credit for their participation; non-university participants received no compensation.

Although the sample was ethnically heterogeneous, the participants indicating that they were of European heritage comprised the largest portion of the sample (49.5%). Those claiming Asian heritage represented a further 25.6% of the sample. Additionally, 88.1% nominated English as their primary language. While 52.7% of the sample indicated that they were currently single, 85.6% had been in at least one romantic relationship in the past.

Materials and Measures

Participants completed a questionnaire consisting of a generic demographics section (e.g. questions about age, sex, ethnicity) and then a longer section consisting of 8 target (experimental) scenarios and 4 distractor scenarios. Each scenario included a briefly described target man represented by a silhouette, followed by a series of questions about him, including his desirability as a long-term partner, the subject of this analysis. The eight experimental scenarios varied in terms of the relationship experience of the target man (4 levels: (currently in a relationship, positive former partner, formerly partnered, no former partner) and whether he expressed an intention to have children or not (two levels: would like to be a father one day, does not wish to have any children). To determine the long-term desirability of the target, men participants were asked to respond on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from 1 ('not very') to 7 ('very') to the question 'How desirable as a long-term partner do you imagine ___ to be?' A propensity to mate copy was indicated if a participant evaluated currently single men with a relationship experience higher on this dimension than men who had never been in a relationship. A propensity to mate poach was indicated if a participant evaluated currently *partnered* men higher on this dimension.

An example of one of the experimental scenarios is given in Fig. 1 below. Here, the man in question is currently in a relationship and does not wish to be a father. The other seven experimental scenarios followed an identical format. The four remaining scenarios were included as 'distractors' in an attempt to obscure the purposes of the study.

Design

This study essentially employed a 2×4 within-subjects design with independent variables of fatherhood intention (positive/negative) and relationship experience (no former partner/formerly partnered/a positive former partner/currently in a relationship). The dependent variable here was the perceived desirability of the target man. A two-way ANOVA was used to analyse the data.

Fig. 1 Example item from a questionnaire

LACHLAN



- is currently in a relationship but has not been in any others in the past 4 years. He does not wish to have children.

From the limited information provided try your best to answer the following questions about Lachlan:

Not very

Very

How desirable as a long-term partner do you imagine Lachlan to be?

Procedure

Potential participants were directed to an online site where they were presented with information about the study and given the opportunity to complete the questionnaire. They responded to a series of demographic questions (age, sex, ethnicity etc.) before being presented with 12 scenarios (distractor and target), each depicting a unique target man. Targets were not presented in a randomised order. The participants were explicitly instructed to respond to all questions as if they were single and free to engage in a new romantic relationship. This was done in attempt to limit any discomfort that they may have felt from being in a relationship, while simultaneously indicating that someone other than their partner was desirable. Additionally, all men except for those described as ‘currently in a relationship’ were explicitly described as single. In order to control for level of physical attractiveness, hair or other potentially confounding factors, only a silhouetted representation of the target man was given (instead of photographic stimuli) alongside a brief text-based description of the man.

Results

Preliminary Analyses and Primary Descriptive Statistics

As described above, to control for any potential effects of the relationship status, the participants were asked to respond as if they were single and free to engage in a new romantic

relationship. As a further check to ensure no effects of participants’ relationship status a one-way between-groups MANOVA was performed on participant ratings for the eight target men, employing participants’ relationship status (single/non-single) as the independent variable. Preliminary assumption testing was conducted with no serious violations of normality, linearity, univariate or multivariate outliers observed. No significant difference between single and non-single participants in their ratings of the target men was found ($p = .24$).

Table 1 below indicates the mean score given for the desirability as a long-term partner (on a 7-point Likert scale) given to each of the target men.

Tests of Predictions

Table 1 displays the mean ratings of desirability as a long-term partner (on a 7-point Likert scale) given to each of the target men. As can be seen, overall, and in 3 out of the 4 relationship experience conditions, the perceived desirability of the target man was higher when he expressed a positive fatherhood intention (wanted children) than if he expressed a negative fatherhood intention. It is certainly noteworthy that in the positive former partner conditions, the target man was actually perceived to be more desirable if he had a negative fatherhood intention (did not want children).

To test the hypotheses, a 4×2 ANOVA was conducted with results indicating both significant main effects of intentions for fatherhood, $F(1, 246) = 163.58, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .40$ (favouring men intending to be parents), and relationship experience ($F(2, 72) = 41.08, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .14$).

Table 1 Mean (SD) desirability as a long-term partner for target men in each condition

Relationship experience					
Fatherhood intention	Currently in a relationship	Positive former partner	Formerly partnered	No former partner	Total
Positive	4.85 (1.43)	3.38 (1.44)	4.46 (1.34)	4.22 (1.39)	4.23 (.99)
Negative	3.60 (1.67)	4.49 (1.32)	3.06 (1.73)	2.73 (1.39)	3.47 (.99)
Total	4.23 (1.23)	3.94 (1.02)	3.76 (1.13)	3.47 (1.08)	

$N = 247, n = 247$

Post hoc tests suggested that men currently in a relationship were considered more desirable than men with a positive former partner ($p < .001$), who were considered more desirable than men with a former partner ($p = .02$), who were in turn considered more attractive than men with no former partner ($p < .001$).

These findings were qualified by an interaction between fatherly intention and relationship experience, $F(2.06, 506.67) = 103.18, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .30$. The ‘positive former partner’ condition was the only relationship experience condition where men not intending to be fathers were considered more desirable than men intending to be fathers, $t(246) = 12.08, p < .001, \eta^2 = .37$ (all other $ps < .001$).

To determine if women were engaging in mate copying the difference in desirability ratings between currently single men that had been formerly partnered and single men with no former partners was tested. The results indicated that unpartnered men were rated as significantly less desirable than formerly partnered men ($MD = .29; p < .001$). Additionally, a propensity to mate poach was indicated by the fact that the desirability ratings of target men currently partnered was greater than those that were currently single (but whom had had previous partners; $MD = .47; p < .001$).

Discussion

Employing silhouetted representations of men, women participating in the current study gave mate-relevant evaluations of target men in varying relationship experience conditions and who either did or did not intend to be fathers. The hypothesis that men with intentions of fatherhood (*would like to be a father one day*) would be considered by women to be more romantically desirable than men indicating the opposite (*does not have children at the moment and does not wish to have any*) was supported. By demonstrating that men without relationship experience were evaluated as less desirable than men with relationship experience, the results supported the idea that women copy the mate preferences of other women under certain conditions. Positive mate-relevant information provided by a former partner positively contributed to a man’s romantic desirability and fatherly intention (‘his most recent ex-partner speaks highly of him as a romantic partner’)

was found to be highly desirable to women. An interaction between the variables of fatherly intention and relationship experience suggested that having a positive former partner seemed to compensate for a man’s expressed lack of intention to become a father. Although men who expressed a desire to have children were generally considered more desirable than those who did not, if a man did not want children, he could still be considered desirable if his previous partner spoke highly of him.

Mate Copying

A propensity to mate copy was demonstrated in the current study by virtue of the fact that the participants rated currently single men who had formerly been in romantic relationships as being more desirable as a long-term partner than men who had not been in a romantic relationship. These results are consistent with previous research indicating that men are more ‘desirable’ (variously operationalised) if they have previously been chosen as a partner, than if they have not. Whereas many studies within the mate copying literature have employed various dependent measures as proxies of a man’s mate value and yielded inconsistent results (see Anderson & Surbey, 2020 for a discussion), the current study used an explicitly stated measure of long-term desirability. While *actual* mate copying was not measured in this study, a *propensity* to copy the preferences of other women was indicated by women finding men with former partners to be more desirable than men without former partners. Such a propensity would presumably motivate or underlie actual instances of mate copying.

Departing from other methodological procedures employing photographs or morphed photographs of real men (Chu, 2012; Eva & Wood, 2006; Little et al., 2008, 2011; Vakirtzis & Roberts, 2010; Waynforth, 2007; Yorzinski & Platt, 2010), the current study used small generic silhouettes of men in an attempt to decrease the perceived importance of visual information and thereby increase the relative importance of the text manipulations. Some of the target men were explicitly described as currently single, but having been in either one or no former relationships in the last 4 years. This procedure is similar to that employed by Anderson and Surbey (2014), who also used silhouette representations and found formerly

partnered men to be more desirable than those without former partners.

Consistent with previous research (Scammell & Anderson, 2020), positive mate-relevant evaluations offered by former partners positively contributed to a man's desirability. The positive opinion of a previous partner enhanced a target man's perceived desirability as a long-term partner above that of other men (formerly partnered or not). In other words, a positive evaluation from a former partner enhances the mate copying effect. The fact that having a former partner speak positively of him increases a man's desirability as a long-term partner is consistent with the idea that the perceived value of something can be meaningfully enhanced by a positive endorsement (Erdogan, 1999), especially when it is coming from an authoritative or reputable source (in this case a former partner). An unexpected interaction suggested that a positive assessment by a former partner *may* compensate for an undesirable anti-fatherhood intention ('does not wish to have children'), but this possibility requires further exploration and consideration of alternative interpretations.

For example, while it may be reasonable to expect that being 'endorsed' by an authority source (former partner) would theoretically make someone seem more appealing (desirable), the enhancement in appeal they receive may be counteracted by female intrasexual aggression. It may be that a former partner who speaks highly of a man is doing so because she is not entirely detached from him. The intrasexual competition that she poses to prospective female suitors may be enough to deter them from pursuing a relationship with the man, or at least make them suspicious of how close the two remain. If their relationship is unresolved, there is a chance that he will go back to her. This may be problematic if he has followed through with his intention to have children with his newest partner but subsequently abandons her and the child to reunite with his former partner.

The availability and accessibility of potential mates have been shown to affect intrasexual competition and aggression among a number of non-human taxa (see Rosvall, 2011). It was found that heterosexual undergraduate students were both more jealous and willing to aggress when they were led to believe that potential mates were scarce (inaccessible) than if they thought potential mates were abundant (Arnocky et al., 2014). In the current study participant 'aggression' toward an anonymous former partner of a target man (potential mate) manifested as disinterest toward dating him. Such an explanation may also be consistent with a cognitive dissonance appraisal (Festinger, 1962), whereby a difficult-to-obtain article is disfavoured ('*I did not want it anyway*').

The present results suggest that having intentions for fatherhood increases one's desirability as a long-term partner and are generally consistent with the findings of a review examining gender differences in mate preferences (Feingold, 1992). Predictions were derived from Trivers' (1972) parental

investment model, which suggests that women (as the sex with higher obligate investment in offspring) more than men seek mates who possess non-physical characteristics that maximise the survival and reproductive prospects of their offspring. A recurrent finding in the literature is that men indicating fatherly intention or competence, or the ability to provision offspring with resources, are considered desirable as romantic partners. The general idea is that men with a favourable attitude toward children will be more likely to contribute to their well-being by providing them with survival-promoting resources.

The current results suggest that having a former partner speak highly of a man makes him somewhat more desirable as a long-term partner and that men expressing a willingness to have children are considered far more desirable than men not wanting children. Curiously, these two characteristics in concert were considered undesirable. Men with positive former partners were more desirable as a long-term partner if they *did not* want children than if they did. It may be that men with too many positive characteristics (has a positive ex, wants children) seem unrealistic and are thus evaluated poorly. It has been shown that claims or offers seeming 'too good to be true' can elicit suspicion and lead to rejection (Steinel et al., 2014). This seemingly paradoxical finding is inconsistent with other findings reported here and awaits further enquiry.

Mate Poaching

Mate poaching was defined as the difference in desirability between men with a current partner and those without one currently, but with a former partner. Based on previous inconsistencies in the literature (Eva & Wood, 2006; Uller & Johansson, 2003), it was unclear whether the current study would detect mate poaching. However, the results suggested that men currently in a relationship were considered more desirable as long-term partners than single men, regardless of whether their most recent romantic partner gave positive mate-relevant information about them. While these results are consistent with the phenomenon of mate copying, we maintain that the processes of mate copying and mate poaching are systematically different. While mate poaching typically involves the additional elements of *pursuing or stealing* someone already in a relationship, these elements are not pre-requisites of mate copying (Anderson & Surbey, 2020). While indicating that an attached other is desirable as a long-term partner may be morally problematic and may possibly invoke some degree of cognitive dissonance (I want it, but I cannot have it), it is different to indicating that someone is willing to couple with a currently attached man, or otherwise steal him from his current partner. The latter carries with it an implicit suggestion that a person is willing to violate an unwritten social law—namely, that individuals in

relationships are (generally) not open to pursuit by individuals outside of the relationship.

Methodological Considerations

The sample in the current study largely comprised university students and was therefore non-random. Presumably, many individuals attend university because they wish to enhance their qualifications and further their career (Battle & Wigfield, 2003). Although there is evidence suggesting that career-oriented individuals (especially younger ones) are less concerned with parenthood (Bass, 2014) and may therefore value parental intentions less in a partner, the employment of a non-random university sample did not appear to significantly impair finding the predicted effects.

There is evidence that mate copying is more common among younger and less experienced women than among their older counterparts (Anderson & Surbey, 2014; Bowers et al., 2011; Waynforth, 2007). Although the sample age range (18–40) was ideal for studying mate selection in general (for example, post-reproductive women may employ entirely different mate selection criteria), the mean age of the present sample was low (21.73 years) and the distribution had a strong skew. Instead of being problematic, however, employing this sample may have enhanced the ability to detect mate copying as well as the strength of its effect.

Finally, it is worth considering that previous research has suggested that physically strong men are more attractive. Muscularity can be an indicator of genetic quality and a capacity to protect offspring (Sell et al., 2017). Therefore, limited visibility of target men, presented in cropped close-up photographs, may make it difficult for women to visually assess a potential mate's body—their strength, leanness and height (Lu & Chang, 2012; Sell et al., 2017). It is certainly possible that stimuli presented in the current study influenced perceptions of paternal ability. Future studies may wish to consider presenting 'more comprehensive' stimuli in an effort to account for this variable.

Implications/Conclusion

The findings of the current study provide evidence of women's propensity to mate copy and support the idea that men who have had relationship experience are more desirable as long-term partners than men without prior relationship experience. Evidence of women's propensity to mate poach was also found. In addition, men indicating that they intended to become fathers were considered more desirable mates than those with the opposite intentions. Interestingly, intending fathers who had a former partner that gave positive mate-relevant information about them had reduced perceived desirability as a long-term partner. This particular finding warrants further exploration and interpretation.

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Data Availability Data on which this study is based can be found at https://osf.io/zbuqj/?view_only=1231937f45274e2391f0d05049be6409.

Declarations

Ethical Review This study received ethical approval from the James Cook University Human Research Ethics Committee (approval number H6041).

Conflict of Interest The authors declare no competing interests.

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