

Research Report

THE POLITICAL PSYCHOLOGY OF REPRODUCTIVE STRATEGIES

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Abstract—We argue that several reproductive strategies that parental investment theory suggests are adaptive for men and for women are in fact most adaptive for individuals able and willing to use power in dominance relationships. We tested whether people's support for social dominance mediates their willingness to use these reproductive strategies. We hypothesized that the strategies of multiple simultaneous mating, resistance to caring for children as one's own, and sexual jealousy will be appealing especially to men who approve of social dominance, and that finding a high-status, high-earning mate will appeal especially to women who approve of social dominance. Support for the hypotheses using multiple samples and multiple measures was found, and theoretical issues are discussed.

Evolutionary theory predicts that gender differences will exist when such differences maximize reproductive success. Relying on Trivers's (1972) parental investment theory, which emphasizes the importance of internal fertilization within the female, some evolutionary psychologists have predicted that men will attempt to acquire several mates simultaneously, will have high thresholds for accepting children as their own, and will be sexually jealous and controlling in their sexual relationships (see Buss, Larsen, Westen, & Semmelroth, 1992; Wilson & Daly, 1992), and women will maximize their substantial "investment" in pregnancy and lactation by obtaining a high-status mate who controls economic resources (cf. Buss, 1989). Numerous studies have shown that men and women indeed differ in their preferences for these reproductive strategies (see Buss, 1992, and Feingold, 1992, for reviews).

Situating psychological differences in the biology of reproduction, however, gives scant attention to the political aspects of sexual relationships, that is, those aspects that concern power. Two other intellectual traditions explicate the political contexts of heterosexual relationships. First, Marxist-feminist scholarship has substantiated Engels's (1891) thesis that gendered divisions of labor and gender inequality in economic power in the public sphere (e.g., wage differences) reinforce divisions of labor and gender inequality within the family, and vice versa (e.g., Collier, 1988; Hamamsay, 1957; Okin, 1989; Reskin, 1988; Sanday, 1981). Second, evolutionary anthropology has shown that in stratified societies, the reproductive strategies implied by parental investment theory are associated with greater fertility (e.g., Betzig, 1993; Dickemann, 1981). These anthropological studies show that use of these strategies not only creates gender inequality and social stratification, but is also predicated on those social conditions (see also Gailey, 1987). In other words, the reproductive strategies under discussion are most useful to men and women who are willing and able to exploit existing inequalities to their individual reproductive advantage.

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Aside from a lack of power, are there any other reasons people might not use these reproductive strategies? People may choose not to use them if their values and ideals for social relationships are incompatible with dominance. We hypothesize that people who oppose social inequality generally will be less likely to engage in these reproductive strategies than people who approve of social dominance. Conversely, approving of social dominance will enable the use of reproductive strategies that create and sustain inequality. This variation in people's general approval of either dominance or egalitarian relationships is called *social-dominance orientation* (SDO).

People with high SDO levels support group-based social inequality, whereas those with low SDO levels support group-based equality. For example, people's SDO levels correlate positively with their support for ideologies justifying gender inequality and ethnic inequality (e.g., sexism, racism, meritocracy, fate) in their societies (e.g., Pratto et al., in press; Pratto, Sidanius, Stallworth, & Malle, 1994).

The present research examined the relation of SDO to gendered reproductive strategies. SDO is systematically related to gender in other arenas. Occupational roles that enhance hierarchy appeal to and are judged more suitable for high-SDO people. Such roles are also judged more suitable for men than women, and men predominate in such roles. Roles that attenuate hierarchy appeal to and are judged more suitable for low-SDO people. Those roles are judged more suitable for women than men, and women are overrepresented in them (Pratto, Stallworth, Sidanius, & Siers, 1997). SDO correlates with orientations toward interpersonal relationships stereotypically conceived of as gendered: People with higher SDO levels are more Machiavellian, power-hungry, cruel (Altemeyer, 1998), psychologically distant, and desiring of prestige (Pratto, 1999), and less empathic and communal (Pratto et al., 1994), than people with lower SDO levels. In fact, men have slightly, but robustly, higher SDO levels than women (e.g., Pratto et al., 1994; Pratto, Stallworth, & Sidanius, 1997; Sidanius, Pratto, & Bobo, 1994; Sidanius, Pratto, & Brief, 1995).

As noted, the reproductive strategies that evolutionary psychologists have described as adaptive for men and women are hierarchy enhancing. As such, we expected them to appeal most to individuals who have high SDO levels, but with one important caveat. Because the adaptive value of these strategies is tied to biological sex, then within either gender, SDO should relate more strongly to use of the strategies theorized to be adaptive for that gender. In particular, we expected preference for the following strategies to relate to SDO more strongly among men than among women: multiple simultaneous mating, resistance to caring for children as one's own, and sexual jealousy. We also expected that desire for a high-status and economically powerful mate would relate more strongly to SDO among women than among men. We examined these hypotheses in multiple samples and using multiple measures of preference for the reproductive strategies and of SDO. We tested whether SDO levels were related to preference for each reproductive strategy within each gender, and whether the strength of these relationships between SDO and preferences differed between genders.

Table 1. Sample size, demographic characteristics, and reliability of the social-dominance orientation (SDO) scale, by sample

Sample	<i>N</i>	Percentage women	Percentage Euro-Americans	Percentage Asian-Americans	Percentage Afro-Americans	Percentage Hispanic-Americans	Reliability of SDO scale (α)
1	462	53	38	40	4	8	.83
2	397	57	17	62	1	13	.82
3	142	39	56	10	1	10	.92
4	108	57	17	62	1	13	.78

Note. Samples 1, 2, and 4 completed the 14-item SDO₅ scale, and Sample 3 completed the 16-item SDO₆ scale (Pratto, Sidanius, Stallworth, & Malle, 1994).

METHOD

Participants

Participants were college students who identified themselves as heterosexual and as unmarried. They completed questionnaires under conditions of anonymity and confidentiality. Characteristics of the samples are summarized in Table 1.

Measures and Specific Predictions

Both validated versions of the SDO scale (the 14-item SDO₅ and the 16-item SDO₆; Pratto et al., 1994) were administered and were highly internally reliable in each sample (see Table 1). Participants also answered a series of questions about their ideal mates and mating circumstances, described later in this section. Participants in Sample 4 also completed 8 SDO items as their ideal mates would.

Multiple mating

Samples 3 and 4 estimated the percentage chance that they would have at least one affair while married to their ideal mate (from 0 to 100%). Higher estimates were expected to relate more strongly to SDO, especially among men. Participants in Sample 4 also indicated, in percentile terms, how sexually faithful they would be in marriage compared with peers their same age and gender. Such estimates were expected to relate negatively to SDO, especially among men.

Resistance to caring for children

Four measures assessed willingness to take on the care of children as one's own. Sample 2 indicated their comfort adopting a child from each of the main ethnic-racial groups in the United States on a scale from 1 (*not at all comfortable*) to 7 (*very comfortable*). As ratings of cross-ethnic adoptions were invariably quite low, we used participants' ratings of their comfort adopting a child from their own ethnic group. Participants in Sample 4 rated whether they would be willing to adopt a child if they were infertile (for women) or if their sperm count was too low to beget a child (for men) ("no" was coded 1; "yes" was coded 2). Parental investment theory postulates that resistance to caring for adopted children is an adaptation against paternity uncertainty. Our third measure invoked that situation: Sample 3 participants rated how comfortable they would be marrying if the woman was pregnant and the couple was not sure that the husband-to-be had gotten the child she carried (ratings were on a scale from 1, *not at*

all comfortable, to 7, *very comfortable*).¹ All three measures were expected to relate more negatively to SDO among men than among women.

Samples 1, 2, and 3 also rated the importance that one's ideal mate has no children from previous relationships, a preference that Buss (1989) argued indicates unwillingness to care for children not biologically one's own. This measure was expected to relate more positively to SDO among men than among women. Following Buss (1989), we asked participants to rate this item from "irrelevant or unimportant" to "essential." Sample 1 made ratings on a scale from 0 to 3 (following Buss, 1989), and Samples 2 and 3 made their ratings on a scale from 1 to 7. These three samples also used the same scales to rate items relating to mate's status (discussed later).

Sexual jealousy

We used three different measures of sexual jealousy. Participants in Samples 1, 2, and 3 indicated the percentage chance that they would file for divorce if they found out that their ideal mate had an extramarital affair. Refusal to grant a divorce under these circumstances indicates higher sexual jealousy because it indicates unwillingness to relinquish the sexual relationship. We therefore expected these ratings to relate negatively to SDO, especially among men.² Participants in Sample 3 indicated the percentage chance that their ideal mate would have at least one extramarital affair while married. Higher estimates indicate more suspicion underlying sexual jealousy, and so this measure was expected to relate positively to SDO, especially among men. Participants in Sample 4 used percentiles to rate how sexually faithful their ideal mate would be, compared with peers the same age and gender. This measure was expected to relate negatively to SDO, especially among men.

Mate status

Ratings of the importance that one's ideal mate have "favorable social status," come "from a respected family," and be "well-educated" were averaged for Samples 1 and 2. For Sample 3, ratings of the importance of being "a good provider" and making "lots of

1. This measure therefore assessed resistance to caring for children not biologically one's own for men, but not for women.

2. Divorcing an unfaithful spouse might protect against paternity uncertainty, so one might imagine that it should relate positively to SDO, at least among men. However, correlations showed that the divorce measure related more to measures of sexual jealousy than to measures of resistance to caring for children.

Table 2. Gender differences on reproductive strategies and their correlation with social-dominance orientation (SDO)

Sample	Reproductive strategy measure	<i>r</i> with SDO	Women		Men		<i>r</i> with sex ^a
			Mean	<i>SD</i>	Mean	<i>SD</i>	
3	Probability of own extramarital affair(s)	-.39**	3.36	8.24	8.47	18.1	.19*
4	Probability of own extramarital affair(s)	.15	11.8	19.8	24.3	25.2	.27*
4	Percentile self more faithful than	-.09	88.2	13.5	81.8	21.4	-.18
2	Level of comfort with adoption ^b	-.12	5.72	1.88	5.87	1.76	.04
4	Willing to adopt if infertile ^c	.33*	1.08	0.27	1.22	0.42	.21
3	Comfort with paternity uncertainty ^b	.19*	2.57	1.67	2.11	1.34	-.15
1	Ideal mate has no previous children ^d	.08	1.87	1.20	1.83	1.21	-.03
2	Ideal mate has no previous children ^e	.03	6.17	1.33	6.05	0.99	-.12
3	Ideal mate has no previous children ^e	-.18*	4.76	1.96	4.25	1.99	-.17
1	Likelihood of divorcing unfaithful spouse	-.02	71.1	26.7	66.7	29.17	-.08
2	Likelihood of divorcing unfaithful spouse	.03	71.7	25.4	73.81	28.8	-.07
3	Likelihood of divorcing unfaithful spouse	.24**	65.3	30.4	46.6	28.0	-.30**
3	Likelihood ideal mate will have affair(s)	-.13	7.64	12.9	8.64	13.0	.04
4	Percentile ideal mate more faithful than	-.31**	91.5	11.9	86.2	16.3	-.19
1	Ideal mate's social status ^d	.24**	1.68	0.74	1.57	0.76	-.08
2	Ideal mate's social status ^e	.26**	4.89	1.33	4.47	1.26	-.21**
3	Ideal mate's social status ^e	-.27**	3.77	1.43	3.04	1.35	-.25**
1	Ideal mate's income level (in \$1,000)	-.01	102.0	47.7	72.9	40.3	-.31**
2	Ideal mate's income level (in \$1,000)	.05	85.2	51.5	70.3	61.5	-.13*
3	Ideal mate's income level (in \$1,000)	-.10	124.9	63.4	118.3	72.1	.04
4	Ideal mate's income level (in \$1,000)	.16	51.5	26.6	37.0	14.5	-.31**

Note. Probabilities and percentiles were rated from 0 to 100.

^aCoded 1 for women and 2 for men.

^bRated from 1 (*not at all comfortable*) to 7 (*very comfortable*).

^cRated 1 = no, 2 = yes.

^dRated from 0 (*irrelevant or unimportant*) to 3 (*essential*).

^eRated from 1 (*irrelevant or unimportant*) to 7 (*essential*).

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$.

money" were also included in this average. Desire for a high-status mate was expected to relate positively to SDO, especially among women.

Mate's economic power

Samples 1, 2, 3, and 4 indicated their ideal mate's annual income level using the following categories: under \$20,000, \$20,000–\$30,000, \$30,000–\$40,000, \$40,000–\$55,000, \$55,000–\$70,000, \$70,000–\$100,000, \$100,000–\$150,000, \$150,000–\$200,000, and over \$200,000. In our analyses, we used the median of each category, using \$10,000 for the lowest category and \$225,000 for the highest category, and we expected this quantity to relate more positively to SDO among women than among men.

RESULTS

Men scored reliably higher than women on SDO in Sample 1 ($r = .27, p < .01$), Sample 2 ($r = .11, p < .05$), and Sample 3 ($r = .25, p < .01$), but not in Sample 4 ($r = 0$). The reproductive strategies showed some reliable gender differences and correlations with SDO (see Table 2). Our hypotheses concerned gender differences in the size of the relations between reproductive strategies and SDO. It was not the case that variance on reproductive strategies was larger in the

gender in which we expected the larger relation to SDO (see Table 2), $\chi^2(1, N = 16) = 1, p > .20$.³

To test our specific hypotheses concerning gender differences in the relation of SDO to these strategies, we conducted a separate regression of SDO on preference for each reproductive strategy within each gender, and then tested for differences in the size of the slopes using t tests.

Multiple Mating

As expected, SDO was more strongly related to self-rated likelihood of having an extramarital affair among men than among women (see slopes and t tests of the difference in the slopes in Table 3). Corroborating this finding, SDO was more negatively related among men than among women to participants' percentile ratings of their own expected sexual faithfulness.

3. We considered the standard deviation for men and for women different if two significant digits differed. There were 10 cases in which the gender with the expected larger relation to SDO also had the larger standard deviation, 6 cases in which the other gender did, and 5 cases with equivalent standard deviations.

Table 3. Slopes of the regression of “masculine” reproductive strategies on social-dominance orientation, for women and men

Strategy and specific measure	Sample	Slope ^a		t-test results ^b		
		Women	Men	t	df	p
Multiple mating						
Probability of own extramarital affair(s)	3	1.62	8.81***	-40.99	125	.0005
Probability of own extramarital affair(s)	4	1.93	5.09	-4.60	85	.0005
Percentile self more faithful than	4	-4.13	-8.00	22.02	84	.0005
Resistance to caring for children						
Level of comfort with adoption	2	-0.28	-0.59*	2.42	194	.01
Willingness to adopt if infertile	4	-0.04	-0.19**	0.84	85	.10
Comfort with paternity uncertainty	3	-0.15	-0.38*	1.35	124	n.s.
Ideal mate has no previous children	1	0.00	0.21*	-2.21	405	.01
Ideal mate has no previous children	2	0.01	-0.10	0.98	321	n.s.
Ideal mate has no previous children	3	0.30	0.62*	-2.02	124	.025
Sexual jealousy						
Likelihood of divorcing unfaithful spouse	1	0.24	-2.51	28.62	405	.0005
Likelihood of divorcing unfaithful spouse	2	-0.97	-3.54	26.48	321	.0005
Likelihood of divorcing unfaithful spouse	3	-3.11	-8.06*	31.69	125	.0005
Likelihood ideal mate will have affair(s)	3	-1.46	5.28**	-43.67	125	.0005
Percentile ideal mate more faithful than	4	-3.92	-7.76**	3.93	86	.0005

^aAsterisks indicate a significant difference of the slope from zero.
^bt tests compared the size of the slopes between men and women.
 *p < .05. **p < .01. ***p < .001.

Resisting Responsibility for the Care of Children

All measures of unwillingness to take responsibility for the care of children showed a reliable relationship to SDO among men but not among women (see Table 3). Men with higher SDO levels were less willing to adopt children, less willing to marry with paternity uncertainty, and more desirous that their mate had no previous children than men with lower SDO levels.

Sexual Jealousy

As expected, sexual jealousy was more strongly related to SDO among men than among women. The difference in the slopes was reliable for each of the five tests and on all three measures (see Table 3).

High Mate Status and Mate Economic Power

Importance that one’s mate have high social status was more strongly related to SDO among women than among men (see Table 4).

Table 4. Slopes of the regression of “feminine” reproductive strategies on social-dominance organization, for women and men

Strategy and specific measure	Sample	Slope ^a		t-test results ^b		
		Women	Men	t	df	p
High-status mate						
Ideal mate’s social status	1	0.28***	0.12*	1.73	405	.05
Ideal mate’s social status	2	0.43***	0.15	2.89	321	.005
Ideal mate’s social status	3	0.69***	0.36*	2.21	126	.025
Economically powerful mate						
Ideal mate’s income level (in \$1,000)	1	4.81	2.16	28.20	405	.0005
Ideal mate’s income level (in \$1,000)	2	7.20	0.69	56.23	237	.0005
Ideal mate’s income level (in \$1,000)	3	10.93	5.19	35.86	123	.0005
Ideal mate’s income level (in \$1,000)	4	7.49	0.75	7.32	77	.0005

^aAsterisks indicate a significant difference of the slope from zero.
^bt tests compared the size of the slopes between men and women.
 *p < .05. ***p < .001.

Desire that one's ideal mate make a high income was also more strongly related to SDO among women than among men (see Table 4).

DISCUSSION

The present research focused on how approval or disapproval of power inequalities influences the preference for reproductive strategies that are postulated to be adaptive for each gender but rely on differences in power. The results generally supported our hypothesis that within each gender, those individuals who most approve of social inequality report being most likely to use reproductive strategies that we argue are predicated on power inequalities. SDO was more strongly related to the expectation of extramarital affairs, resistance to caring for children as one's own, and sexual jealousy among men than it was among women. SDO was more strongly related to a complementary reproductive strategy—obtaining high-status, economically powerful mates—among women than it was among men. These results were replicated in multiple samples and using multiple measures of the reproductive strategies and of SDO.

The observed interactions between SDO and gender demonstrate that reproductive strategies cannot be understood solely in terms of the "biology" of reproduction. Rather, in keeping with the Darwinian emphasis on the interaction between the organism and the environment, we argue that power distributions are as integral to reproduction as internal fertilization is. Most especially, the present research shows that evolutionary thinking can make more specialized predictions than simply predicting gender differences that ignore heterogeneity within each gender and that presumably result from biological sex differences (Fausto-Sterling, Gowaty, & Zuk, 1997).

Instead, we predicted and showed that within each gender, variance in preference for these strategies was associated with SDO. Coupled with anthropological research, the present research provides an empirical basis for the view that the reproductive strategies examined here are most accessible to those individuals with the means and willingness to exercise power over others. Thus, the strategies derived from parental investment theory are not merely adaptive to procreation, but also function to organize and reproduce unequal social relationships (see Pratto, 1996; Pratto, Sidanius, & Stallworth, 1993).

Another implication of our results is that people with high and low SDO levels probably select and create different marriage environments for themselves. People prefer a spouse with a similar SDO level as themselves; in Sample 4, participants' reports of their ideal mates' SDO scores ($\alpha = .71$) correlated positively with their own scores, $r = .31$, $p < .01$, and Altemeyer (1998, p. 85) found that husbands' and wives' SDO_s scores correlated ($r = .45$). A marriage of two people with high SDO levels may have a husband who provides financial and status resources as his wife wishes, but who is also sexually and economically controlling and more likely to be sexually unfaithful. In contrast, a marriage of two low-SDO people may have less gender differentiation in terms of sexual promiscuity, sexual jealousy, social status and earnings, and child care.

Our results point to the need for evolutionary theory to examine the reproductive strategies and behaviors of people who are unwilling or unable to use social dominance to their own individual advantage. Indeed, evolutionary theory not only has been criticized for failing to do so (e.g., Brewer & Caporael, 1990), but also has often been critiqued as a justification for gender inequality and social stratification (e.g., Fausto-Sterling et al., 1997; Haraway, 1991; Shields, 1975;

Travis & Yeager, 1991). In fact, the present research showed that the reproductive strategies presumed adaptive for all men and all women are most descriptive of high-SDO people. Overgeneralizing the adaptiveness of these strategies not only may normalize and naturalize strategies that extend social inequality, as critics claim, but also is untenable from an evolutionary standpoint, as such strategies can be enacted only by persons who possess the means to exert power over others and are willing to do so. An evolutionary psychology that attends to variability associated with position within dominance relationships will at once be more theoretically consistent and less likely to bear the brunt of such criticisms.

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Political Psychology of Reproductive Strategies

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