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Men's Benefit-Provisioning Mate Retention Behavior Mediates the Relationship between Their
Agreeableness and Their Oral Sex Behaviors

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ABSTRACT

Men perform oral sex on their romantic partner as part of a broader benefit-provisioning mate retention strategy and men higher in Agreeableness are especially likely to provision their partner with benefits. The current research explored whether men's benefit-provisioning mate retention behavior mediated the relationship between their Agreeableness and their oral sex behaviors in their long-term romantic relationship. Men ($n = 346$) in a committed, sexual, heterosexual relationship completed the Mate Retention Inventory—a 104-item instrument that assesses the frequency with which they performed various mate retention behaviors during the past month, a 40-item personality inventory, and reported on a questionnaire their interest in and the time they spent performing oral sex on their romantic partner during their most recent sexual encounter with her. The results indicate that men higher in Agreeableness reported greater interest in and spend more time performing oral sex on their partner, and that their benefit-provisioning mate retention behaviors partially mediated these relationships. We discuss limitations of the current research. The current research is the first to investigate the relationship between personality dimensions and oral sex behaviors, and adds to a growing body of research documenting that mate retention strategies influence sexual behavior.

KEY WORDS: Agreeableness; oral sex; mate retention; relationship satisfaction; personality.

INTRODUCTION

Oral sex is a prominent feature of human sexuality. Oral sex is practiced in dozens of cultures worldwide (Bailey, Neema, & Othieno, 1991; Guadamuz et al., 2010; Iwawaki & Wilson, 1983; Kaestle & Halpern, 2007; Parker, 1999; Santtila et al., 2007; Wilson & Lang, 1981), is frequently depicted in pornography (Rimm, 1994), and is depicted on human ancestral cave paintings. Despite the ubiquity of oral sex, previous research has not investigated the links between personality dimensions and oral sex behaviors. Because men more often perform oral sex in the context of a long-term romantic relationship than in a casual, sexual encounter (Armstrong, England, & Fogarty, 2009; Backstrom, Armstrong, & Puentes, 2012; Lewis, Granato, Blayney, Lostutter, & Kilmer, 2012; Reiber & Garcia, 2010), the current research explored individual differences in men's oral sex behaviors in their long-term romantic relationship.

The five-factor model of personality describes five dimensions of stable, individual differences: Surgency, Agreeableness, Conscientiousness, Emotional Stability, and Openness to Experience (Goldberg, 1982; Norman, 1963). Men's Agreeableness is positively associated with their romantic partner's relationship satisfaction (Donellan, Conger, & Bryant, 2004; Lenhart & Neyer, 2006; Malouff, Thorsteinsson, Schutte, Bhullar, & Rooke, 2010). Men high in Agreeableness more often maintain stable, harmonious relationships (Bentler & Newcomb, 1978; Buss, 1991; Karney & Bradbury, 1995; Kelly & Conley, 1987; Kwan, Bond, & Singelis, 1997). Women's sexual satisfaction and marital satisfaction is positively related to their partner's Agreeableness (Botwin, Buss, & Shackelford, 1997).

Oral sex may function, in part, to increase a romantic partner's relationship satisfaction. Men report performing oral sex on their partner to sexually satisfy her (Cornell & Halpern-

Felsher, 2006) and women who more frequently receive oral sex from their partner report greater relationship satisfaction (Kaestle & Halpern, 2007; Santtila et al., 2007). Because men's Agreeableness is positively related to their partner's relationship satisfaction, and because men perform oral sex on their partner, in part, to satisfy her, we hypothesized that men higher in Agreeableness would report greater interest in (Hypothesis 1) and spend more time (Hypothesis 2) performing oral sex on their partner.

Men perform "mate retention" behaviors to reduce the likelihood of their partner's infidelity. Buss (1988) identified several mate retention behaviors and constructed a Mate Retention Inventory of these behaviors. Miner, Starratt, and Shackelford (2009) grouped items from this inventory into a superordinate "benefit-provisioning" domain—behaviors that reduce the likelihood of partner infidelity by increasing the partner's relationship satisfaction (Shackelford, Besser, & Goetz, 2008; Shackelford & Buss, 2000).

Men higher in Agreeableness are more likely to provision their partner with benefits. Agreeableness is strongly related to altruism (Buss, 1996; Goldberg, 1982; MacDonald, 1995; Norman, 1963; Saucier & Goldberg, 1996) and men incur costs when they provision their partner with benefits (Miner et al., 2009), including time, effort (e.g., "I made sure that I looked nice for my partner"), and money (e.g., "I bought my partner an expensive gift") (Buss, 1988).

Men may perform oral sex on their partner as part of a broader benefit-provisioning mate retention strategy. Men at greater risk of their partner's infidelity report greater interest in performing oral sex and spend more time performing oral sex on their partner (Pham & Shackelford, 2013a). Furthermore, men who perform more frequently mate retention tactics, in general, and who more frequently provision their partner with benefits, in particular, are also

more likely to report greater interest in and spend more time performing oral sex on their partner (Pham & Shackelford, 2013b).

Because men higher in Agreeableness are more likely to provision their partner with benefits, and because oral sex may be part of a broader benefit-provisioning mate retention strategy, we hypothesized that men's benefit-provisioning mate retention behaviors would mediate the relationship between their Agreeableness and their interest in performing oral sex on their partner (Hypothesis 3) as well as the time they spend performing oral sex on their partner (Hypothesis 4).

Men's Emotional Stability and Conscientiousness correlates with their partner's relationship satisfaction (Heller, Watson, & Ilies, 2004; Malouff et al., 2010) and, therefore, scores on these personality dimensions may correlate with oral sex behaviors. Because no previous research has investigated the links between personality dimensions and oral sex behaviors, we do not offer predictions about which personality dimension best predicts the oral sex measures. For reportorial completeness, we statistically explored the relationships between men's standings on each of the five personality dimensions and the outcome variables.

METHOD

Participants and Procedure

Men ($n = 346$) in a committed, sexual, heterosexual relationship participated. The mean participant age was 24.2 years ($SD = 7.17$) and the mean relationship length was 36.2 months ($SD = 51.68$). Participants signed a consent form and completed questionnaires concerning their mate retention behaviors, personality features, and recent oral sex behavior. To maintain anonymity, participants placed the completed questionnaires in an envelope that they then sealed and placed the consent form in a separate envelope.

Measures

Mate Retention Behaviors

Participants completed the Mate Retention Inventory—a 104-item instrument that assesses the frequency with which men performed various mate retention behaviors during the past month (Buss, 1988). On a 4-point scale, participants reported how frequently they performed each behavior (0 = *Never performed this act*, to 3 = *Often performed this act*).

Following Miner et al. (2009), we constructed a *benefit-provisioning mate retention* variable ($\alpha = .92$) from the sum of scores to specific items from the Mate Retention Inventory (e.g., “I bought my partner an expensive gift”).

Five-Factor Model of Personality

Participants completed a 40-item inventory which assesses standings on the five major dimensions of personality (Botwin et al., 1997). On a 7-point scale, participants selected bipolar adjectives that described themselves, in general (e.g., 1 = *passive*, 7 = *active*; 1 = *undependable*, 7 = *reliable*). Following Botwin et al., we constructed scores for each of the five personality dimensions from responses to the personality inventory: *Surgency* ($\alpha = .61$), *Agreeableness* ($\alpha = .65$), *Conscientiousness* ($\alpha = .63$), *Emotional Stability* ($\alpha = .52$), and *Openness to Experience* ($\alpha = .53$). These alpha reliabilities are lower than the conventional cutoff ($\alpha = 0.70$), suggesting that this personality instrument may have psychometric problems of reliability (Cronbach, 1951). However, in previous work these bipolar adjective pairs have demonstrated high internal consistency as well as high convergent validity with the Big Five Inventory and with the NEO Five Factor Inventory (Goldberg, 1992; John & Srivastava, 1999).

Oral Sex

Participants provided information about their most recent sexual encounter with their partner using a 10-point scale: own interest in performing oral sex (0 = *Less interested or excited than is typical for me*, 9 = *More interested or excited than is typical for me*), and duration of oral sex (0 = *Less time than is typical for me*, 9 = *More time than is typical for me*).

RESULTS

See Table for zero-order correlations among target variables. Men's interest in performing oral sex was correlated with the frequency with which they provisioned their partner with benefits, their Agreeableness and their Conscientiousness. The amount of time men spent performing oral sex was correlated with the frequency with which they provisioned their partner with benefits, their Agreeableness, and their Conscientiousness. The frequency with which men provisioned their partner with benefits was correlated with their Surgency, their Agreeableness, and their Openness to Experience.

The current research investigates whether men's benefit-provisioning mate retention behaviors mediate the relationship between their standings on five dimensions of personality and their oral sex behaviors. Mediation analyses require that the predictor (personality dimension) correlates with both the mediator (benefit-provisioning mate retention) and with the outcomes (oral sex; Baron & Kenny, 1986). Here, we focus on Agreeableness because it is the *only* personality dimension that correlated significantly with both the mediator and with the outcomes. We conducted two regression analyses predicting interest in (Hypothesis 1) and time spent (Hypothesis 2) performing oral sex from men's Agreeableness. Consistent with Hypotheses 1 and 2, men higher in Agreeableness reported greater interest in (Hypothesis 1; $\beta = .26$, $SE = .10$, $t = 2.52$, $p < .05$) and spent more time (Hypothesis 2; $\beta = .27$, $SE = .10$, $t = 2.53$, $p < .05$) performing oral sex on their partner.

Following Preacher and Hayes (2004), we conducted a bootstrapping mediation analysis to test Hypothesis 3. First, the test of Hypothesis 1 indicated that men's Agreeableness was positively related to their interest in performing oral sex on their partner. We conducted a regression analysis predicting benefit-provisioning mate retention from Agreeableness ($\beta = .21$, $SE = .10$, $t = 1.99$, $p < .05$). Next, we entered Agreeableness and benefit-provisioning mate retention simultaneously into a regression predicting interest in performing oral sex. The model was significant, $F(2, 343) = 10.91$, $R^2 = .06$, $p < .001$. Benefit-provisioning mate retention uniquely predicted interest in performing oral sex ($\beta = .08$, $SE = .02$, $t = 3.91$, $p < .001$). Finally, we assessed whether the relationship between Agreeableness and interest in performing oral sex remained after controlling statistically for benefit-provisioning mate retention. The relationship remained ($\beta = .21$, $SE = .10$, $t = 2.52$, $p < .05$) but was significantly reduced (Fig. 1). Supporting Hypothesis 3, benefit-provisioning mate retention was a significant but partial mediator between Agreeableness and interest in performing oral sex (Upper 95% CI limit = .13, Lower 95% CI limit = .02).

We conducted a bootstrapping mediation analysis to test Hypothesis 4. First, the tests of Hypotheses 2 and 3 indicated that Agreeableness was positively related to time spent performing oral sex and benefit-provisioning mate retention, respectively. We entered Agreeableness and benefit-provisioning mate retention simultaneously into a regression predicting time spent performing oral sex. The model was significant, $F(2, 343) = 6.42$, $R^2 = .04$, $p < .01$, and benefit-provisioning mate retention uniquely predicted time spent performing oral sex ($\beta = .05$, $SE = .02$, $t = 2.52$, $p = .01$). We assessed whether the relationship between Agreeableness and time spent performing oral sex remained after controlling statistically for benefit-provisioning mate retention. The relationship remained ($\beta = .24$, $SE = .11$, $t = 2.16$, $p < .05$; Fig. 2), but was

significantly reduced. Supporting Hypothesis 4, benefit-provisioning mate retention was a significant but partial mediator between Agreeableness and time spent performing oral sex (Upper 95% CI = .10, Lower 95% CI = .01).

DISCUSSION

The results of this research supported the hypothesis that men higher in Agreeableness report greater interest in and spend more time performing oral sex on their partner. The results also indicated that men's benefit-provisioning mate retention behaviors partially mediated the relationship between their Agreeableness and their interest in, and time spent, performing oral sex on their partner. That is, although men who more frequently provision their partner with benefits report greater interest in, and time spent, performing oral sex on their partner, men who were higher in Agreeableness also reported greater interest in, and time spent, performing oral sex on their partner, even after controlling statistically for their benefit-provisioning mate retention behaviors.

These findings were also consistent with traditional conceptualizations of the Agreeableness factor. That is, Agreeableness assesses the degree to which individuals embody a sympathetic nature and are willing to invest in others (Goldberg, 1990; John & Srivastava, 1999). Therefore, men higher in Agreeableness may be more likely to perform oral sex on their partner to satisfy her desires.

A limitation of the current study is that we relied on self-report to assess oral sex behaviors. Researchers have identified measurement error and participation bias as concerns regarding self-reports of sexual behaviors (Catania, Gibson, Chitwood, & Coates, 1990; Weinhardt, Forsyth, Carey, Jaworski, & Durant, 1998). For example, Boekeloo et al. (1994) secured reports of risky sexual behaviors by administering written questionnaires, audiotape

questionnaires, and face-to-face interviews. Boekeloo et al. concluded that there were significantly different numbers of missing responses among the three methodologies. Future research would benefit from employing multiple methodologies in assessing oral sex behaviors, such as securing reports from both men and their partners of men's oral sex behaviors.

Future research would profit from exploring men's *partner's* personality dimensions to predict men's oral sex behaviors. For example, men who are mated to women higher in Surgency and Openness to Experience are at greater risk of their partner's infidelity (Goetz et al., 2005; Schmitt & Buss, 2001) and perform more mate retention behaviors (Goetz et al., 2005). Men at greater risk of their partner's infidelity (Pham & Shackelford, 2013a) and who perform more mate retention behaviors (Pham & Shackelford, 2013b) also report greater interest in and spend more time performing oral sex on their partner. We hypothesize, therefore, that men mated to women higher in Surgency and Openness to Experience will report greater interest in and spend more time performing oral sex on their partner.

In summary, this research demonstrated that investigating men's personality dimensions and their mate retention behaviors can provide insight into their oral sex behaviors. Heterosexual men who more frequently perform benefit-provisioning mate retention behaviors—and who are higher in Agreeableness—are more likely to satisfy their partner by performing oral sex. The current research is the first to investigate the relationship between personality dimensions and oral sex behaviors, and adds to a growing body of research documenting that mate retention strategies influence sexual behavior.

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Table. Zero-order correlations among target variables.

	1.	2.	3.	4.	5.	6.	7.
1. Interest in oral sex							
2. Time spent on oral sex	.45**						
3. Benefit-provisioning	.22**	.15**					
4. Surgency	.05	.07	.11*				
5. Agreeableness	.14*	.14*	.14**	.12*			
6. Conscientiousness	.11*	.14**	.08	.13*	.33**		
7. Emotional Stability	.03	.08	-.09	.11*	.30**	.19**	
8. Openness to experience	.07	.05	.12*	.19**	.18**	.21**	.11*

df = 344, *p < .05, **p < .01

Figure Captions

Fig. 1. Summary of mediation analysis with β weights. The relationship between men's Agreeableness and their interest in performing oral sex on their partner was reduced significantly when controlling statistically for the frequency with which they provision their partner with benefits. $n = 346$ men. $*p < .05$, $**p < .01$, $***p < .001$

Fig. 2. Summary of mediation analysis with β weights. The relationship between men's Agreeableness and the time they spend performing oral sex on their partner was reduced significantly when controlling statistically for the frequency with which they provision their partner with benefits. $n = 346$ men. $*p < .05$, $**p < .01$

Figures

Fig. 1.

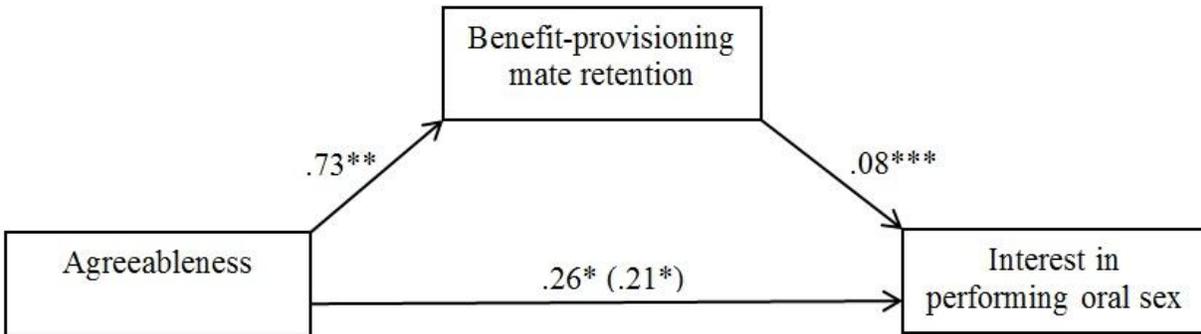


Fig. 2.

