



SPECIAL REVIEW

The Sociobiology of Sex in Experimental Investigations

DAVID M. BUSS: *The Evolution of Desire: Strategies of Human Mating*. New York: Basic Books. 262 pp. Hardback. ISBN 0-465-07750-1.

David Buss has become well known for using the sociobiological approach to the study of human mating. His work is, in essence, a continuation of Darwin's approach to sexual selection. According to Darwin, this takes two forms. Members of the same sex compete with each other, and to the winner go the spoils—sexual access to members of the opposite sex. On the other hand, members of one sex choose a mate based on their preferences for particular qualities in that mate. Genes of those victorious in battle with competitors of their own sex, and of those attractive to the other sex, survive; those of the loser and the less attractive don't. Sexual strategies are built up to gain access to mates; they are the survivors of strategies that have been found successful in the past—their earlier success ensures the survival of the genes that produced the successful behaviour.

In large part the different strategies of men and women are built upon their different aims and values, which in turn are determined by their biological contribution. Women have overall only 400 ova to play with, and have to spend lengthy periods of time carrying and caring for their babies. Men have millions of sperm to dispense each time they mate. Thus males and females are inexorably driven to the opposite poles of the r/K reproductive strategies dimension. People and animals high in K are longer lived, more altruistic, and sexually restrained; they husband their sexual resources, having few offspring but caring for them. Those following the r strategy "cast their bread upon the waters", i.e. spreading their semen widely, leaving care for the offspring to others, if any care is given at all. Different species differ profoundly on this continuum, with humans toward the K end, oysters toward the r end, but within species there are great individual differences, the greatest probably between r-oriented males and K-oriented females. Buss does not use these concepts, but argues independently for very similar relationships.

Does this general biological background give us testable predictions to test in the human mating game? Buss has been exceptionally successful in deriving such predictions, and testing them, not only in the United States, but in many other countries and cultures. This book is the record of his work, and very impressive it is. Darwin's theory comes out trumps; most if not all the deductions made by Buss have led to a successful conclusion, and not only in Western cultures; as they should be, the effects are pretty universal. Indeed, Buss is often able to cite very opposite investigations of animals that parallel his human experiments. Biological genetic factors seem to account for an enormous range of human sexual behaviours. The "Evolution of Desire" is likely to become a classic in the sociobiological literature. It well illustrates Darwin's own view of the importance of experimenting to sustain or disprove a theory. "How odd it is that anyone should not see that all observations must be for or against some view if it is to be of any service". Baconian inductivists among psychologists, if there are still any left, take note—hostility to theory is not the best way to do science!

The book throws much light on "What women want", and why "Men want something else"—to wit, a bit on the side. It deals with casual sex, the problem of attracting a partner, staying together, sexual conflict, and breaking up. Buss is always sensible, and above all relies on facts and experiments, rather than on experience and prejudice, as so many authors in this field do. His book may not have the popular success that has followed the meretricious Hite reports, but it has the one thing Hite could never aspire to—solid scientific backing.

There are a few points that may be worth mentioning. Buss nowhere deals with the genetic studies of sexual behaviour that have been done; these provide a useful complement to the sociobiological–evolutionary approach. He is under the impression that intelligence is 'moderately' heritable; I could wish that the effects of any causal factor psychologists study could be so 'moderately' successful! IQ heritability for adults is in the 70s or 80s, accounting for 70–80% of the variance; is there any other factor in the whole of psychology that accounts for anything like as much for any variable that has been studied? He states that "similarity matters in personality characteristics such as extraversion" where mating is concerned, giving correlations between spouses of +0.25. Eysenck and Wakefield (1981) found no correlation between spouses in a large-scale study, and that is typical of all but psychopathological traits. On p. 54, Buss mentions the fact that composite facial photographs are considered more beautiful than the individual faces, and calls this a recent scientific breakthrough. However, Galton had already shown the same thing a hundred years ago! On p. 80 he mentions animal work supporting the "Coolidge effect"!, but fails to mention that it occurs by no means universally, even in (introverted?) rats!

On p. 93, Buss states that women whose parents were divorced are far more promiscuous than women whose families were intact; and assumes that there is a causal effect. But the relation is much more likely to be genetic—promiscuous women get divorced and have promiscuous daughters! There is good evidence that in personal behaviour the between-family environmental variance is practically zero. This also argues against Buss's statement on p. 217 that "evolutionary psychology focuses on early experiences, parenting practices, and other environmental factors to explain variability in mating practices." He does not even consider genetic factors, which are known to be very powerful, and have a much stronger empirical basis (Eysenck, 1976). It is curious that a follower of Darwin should so disregard proven genetic influences.

Finally, a comment on Buss's argument that men's dominant control of resources determines women's choice of mate. There is considerable evidence that in courting and mating men and women tend to be close to each other on a scale of physical attractiveness. This is probably a more important variable than 'control of resources' for the majority of women and men; it ought certainly to have been mentioned and discussed. Buss does discuss attractiveness, and makes the important point that there is a good deal of trans-cultural objectivity to ideals of beauty, which in fact seem to be deducible from biological principles. The application of the equity principle to mating in this respect, however, is of additional interest, and deserves attention.

Altogether, then, this is an important, indeed revolutionary book, dealing with important social problems on a scientific basis, testing a well-established evolutionary theory by means of well designed and well executed experiments on human subjects, and finding considerable support for Darwin's original theory. The book, in addition to making a solid scientific contribution, is very well written, reads easily, and even has wit and humour upon occasion. Who could ask for more?

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