

Men and Women

Let us also consider what good might come from the widespread acceptance of the evolutionary explanation for certain psychological differences between men and women. But first, before considering an ultimate explanation for the differences, we have to secure a consensus that these differences even exist. One major school of feminist thought is not prepared to concede this point. As Alice Eagly acknowledges, “Much feminist research on sex differences was (and still is) intended to shatter stereotypes about women’s characteristics by proving the women and men are essentially equivalent in their personalities, behavioral tendencies, and intellectual abilities”. This conclusion is (and was) designed to promote an honorable political end, namely, the creation of equal societal opportunities for women, overcoming the long cultural practice of handicapping women in the workplace and elsewhere. If one could establish psychological identity of the sexes, so the argument goes, then there could be no justification for inequality of treatment.

Because of the tactical appeal of the argument, the feminists identified by Eagly have generally engaged in a holding action to preserve the view shared by most social scientists in the 1970s, the view that male-female psychological differences are very small or nonexistent. To this end, feminist rhetoric has continued to emphasize the “little differences” claim despite an abundance of evidence to the contrary. We earlier reviewed some evidence that men were *on average* more motivated than women to seek political power and high social status, proximate drives that may have been naturally selected because of their positive reproductive consequences for men. Let us imagine that women with an interest in group dynamics were made aware of these male predispositions, which, for example, often cause men to try to take charge of small working groups composed of both sexes. As Alice Eagley notes, knowing the true nature of the beast, and his desire to control and dominate, could help women so inclined to deal more effectively with these individuals, especially if they recognized the tactics that males employ to achieve their power-monopolizing goals. If so, women might be able to “intervene to produce a more equal sharing of power”.

Let us also imagine that men were instructed about the evolutionary basis for their emotional reactions and psychological drives, which can sometimes lead them to run roughshod over others or to insist on occupying center stage in the attempt to secure dominance within groups. To the extent that they learned this lesson, men might have greater self-understanding and might even develop a certain sense of detachment about their pursuits and proximate desires, which could reduce the less pleasant aspects of the “I will now take charge” syndrome. If nothing else, truly educated women could point out what was going on when men attempted to hog the limelight, and if their listeners understood evolutionary theory as well, the message might get through on occasion.

As evolutionary education would surely do no harm in this or the many other arenas in which conflicts between the sexes arise. Consider the matter of the double standard with its forgiving view of male adultery coupled with harsh and moralistic prohibitions against female adultery. An evolutionary tells us that men tend to accept the double standard because in the past males who cuckolded their neighbors while preventing their own wives from cuckolding them tended to leave more descendants than men who were incapable of cautious adultery and unconcerned about wifely fidelity.

But in order to make use of this evolutionary understanding, people would of course have to avoid committing the sorry naturalistic fallacy, which has caused so much trouble over the years. Men and women would have to realize that naturally selected traits were not naturally desirable; both sexes would have to grasp the idea that explanatory statements about the evolutionary basis of human behavior did not mean that people were morally obligated to behave in the best interests of their genes. Indeed, as Robert Wright has written, “A central lesson of evolutionary psychology is that we should cast a wary eye on our moral intuitions generally”. That’s the heart of the matter. An awareness of the ultimate reasons for our eagerness to make moral judgments and the realization that our emotions really work on behalf of our genes ought to make us less self-indulgent about our feelings, perhaps

encouraging us to be a little more cautious on the moralizing front, a little more reluctant to express moral certitudes, a little more introspective, a little less likely to assume that whatever feels right to us is good for something other than our genes. Maybe, just maybe, men who really understood evolutionary theory and the naturalistic fallacy would be less likely to claim, “My behavior is excusable but similar behavior in my wife is an offense against God.”

The most unpleasant and damaging manifestation of the conflict between sexes lies in the area of rape and other forms of coercive sex. Here too I believe that evolutionary theory has something important and practical to tell us about the phenomenon, if only we can put aside ideological blinders and a belief in the naturalistic fallacy. These requirements will not be easily met, given the tendency of many to invoke the naturalistic fallacy when reacting to evolutionary analyses of coercive sex. Let a biologist attempt to explain why men rape and he can be guaranteed to hear that the hypothesis is not only dangerous but morally repugnant. And they will be told so in high dudgeon, as in “it seems quite clear that the biologicization of rape and the dismissal of social or ‘moral’ factors will... tend to legitimate rape” and “it is reductive and reactionary to isolate rape from other forms of violent antisocial behavior and dignify it with adaptive significance”. Outbursts of this sort occur because commentators believe that if rape were shown to be adaptive, as denied in evolutionary terms, then it would also be morally legitimate and socially defensible. Although the distinction in meaning between “evolved” and “moral” evidently is not easily grasped, nothing commands us to believe that biologically adaptive traits are necessarily socially desirable.

Furthermore, the standard feminist position on coercive sex is founded on the ideological, as opposed to evidentiary, grounds. Inspired by Susan Brownmiller’s *Against Our Will*, where she writes, “all rape is an exercise in power” and “is nothing more or less than a conscious process of intimidation by which all men keep all women in a state of fear”, the basic feminist argument has become that coercive sex is about power rather than sex. According to this view, rapists and their ilk are motivated purely by the proximate desire to dominate and intimidate women, a desire that stems from the influences of patriarchal society dedicated to the preservation of male control. According to this view, the idea that rape has anything to do with sex is a myth, pure and simple.

Although many versions of the standard argument exist among the feminist factions, when college students are asked about their understanding of rape, most have heard of and many accept the Brownmillerian viewpoint. Familiarity with the “rape has nothing to do with sex” hypothesis stems from the energetic efforts of many feminists to educate others on the feminist position vis-à-vis the causes of rape. As a result, documents containing the “myths about rape” are widely available on the Internet. The “rape myths” presented to students at the University of Wisconsin, Texas A & M, Tulane University, and Monash University in Australia, to pick a few, contain statements like the following: “Since sexual assault is all about power, not sex, the age or appearance of the victim is irrelevant” and “Rape is not about sexual orientation or sexual desire. It is an act of power and control in which the victim is brutalized and humiliated”.

Now the idea that sexual motivation plays *no* part in rape seems decidedly counterintuitive, given that the vast majority of rapists are sufficiently sexually aroused to achieve an erection and to ejaculate in their victims. Yet many persons have no doubt about it; sexual desire is not an issue in the rapist’s behavior. The appeal of this assertion must stem from the fact that most people consider sexual desire a “natural” phenomenon, which some feminists fear will make the public more willing to excuse the rapist, at least in part, on the grounds that rape is in some sense “natural.” In contrast, if rape is said to be violence pure and simple driven by a criminal desire to brutalize and humiliate, then no one would be tempted to forgive the rapist or be more understanding of his behavior. In other words, acceptance of the naturalistic fallacy provides the impetus to insist that there is nothing “natural” about the causes of rape.

To this end, it is also valuable to claim that rape is a purely human phenomenon, not part of the sexuality of other species: “No zoologist, as far as I know, has ever observed that animals rape in their

natural habitat, the wild". Moreover, why not assert that rape is a purely cultural phenomenon, the invention of some men in some warped societies. If true, then one need "only" educate the members of that society in order to change the ruling male ideology of rape, which will eliminate the problem. To this end, many feminists assert that rape is not a universal feature of all societies but rather a manifestation of just those societies in which a particularly unfortunate ideological perspective has come to shape male attitudes and behavior.

The advocates of the "rape has nothing to do with sex" hypothesis have been circumspect in dealing with the relevant data. For example, with respect to the so-called uniqueness of rape, even when Brownmiller wrote her book in 1975, ample evidence existed that males from a very wide range of animals sometimes force themselves on females that struggle to prevent copulation from occurring. Over the years, much more information has been assembled on the practice of forced mating in everything from insects to chimpanzees, orangutans, and other primate relatives of man.

For example, I have on occasion seen a male of the desert beetle *Tegrodera aloga* run to a female and wrestle violently with her in an attempt to throw her on her side. If successful, the male probes the female's genital opening with his averted aedeagus (the entomological label for "penis") and he sometimes is able to achieve insertion of the same, despite the female's attempts to break free. What makes this behavior so striking is that male *Tegrodera aloga* are perfectly capable of courting potential partners in a decorous manner. In these nonviolent interactions, a male cautiously moves in front of female, often one that is feeding on a tiny desert plant of some sort, and uses his antennae to sweep her antennae into two grooves in front of his head. The two may stand facing one another for many minutes while the female feeds and the male strokes her antennae over and over again.

Judging from what is known of a somewhat similar beetle, the male's courtship maneuvers probably permit the female to assess the concentration of cantharidin in the male's blood via analysis of odors emanating from pores in the grooves in his head. Cantharidin is a toxic biochemical manufactured by males of some beetles for transfer to their mates during copulation; females safely store the material for later use in coating their eggs, the better to repel ants and other egg eaters after the eggs are laid in the soil. In other words, courting males communicate their capacity to provide their mates with a useful nuptial gift. If a female perceives her suitor to be in possession of valuable resources that she will receive, she may eventually permit him to mount and copulate sedately. If not, she pulls her antennae free and walks away.

Males that attempt to short-circuit the female choice mechanism in this species probably lack the qualities, especially high levels of transferable cantharidin that motivate females to become sexually receptive, although this prediction remains untested. Under these circumstances, males may have the conditional capacity to try to inseminate females forcibly, reducing female reproductive success to some extent in the process, which is why females of this species resist. The idea that forced copulation only happens in humans is therefore simply untrue.

And what about the claim that rape is haphazardly distributed among human cultures, present here, absent there, thanks to arbitrary variation in cultural histories and influences? You will remember Margaret Mead's incorrect assertion that rape was absent in traditional Samoan society. Analysis of similar claims about other groups has shown them to be equally erroneous. Rape is a cultural universal.

These findings are part of the reason why some sociobiologists think that the "rape has nothing to do with sex" hypothesis is not only implausible but untrue. One sociobiological alternative is that rape is partly the product of evolved male psychological mechanisms, including those that promote ease of sexual arousal, the capacity for impersonal sex, the desire for sexual variety for variety's sake, a desire to control the sexuality of potential partners, and a willingness to employ coercive tactics to achieve copulations under some conditions. Why would these proximate mechanisms have spread through ancestral hominid populations? Because they almost certainly contributed to an increase in the number of females inseminated by some ancestral males with a consequent increase in the number of offspring produced.

According to this approach, rape itself could either be a maladaptive side effect of sexual psychological mechanisms that have other generally adaptive outcomes *or* rape could be one of the tactics controlled by a conditional strategy that enables an individual to select the option with the highest fitness payoff given his particular circumstances. Note that these are two separate hypotheses, each of which generates distinctive predictions, so that either one or the other or both could potentially be rejected via standard scientific testing. The maladaptive byproduct hypothesis is plausible because it is clear that in humans and other species, the intense sex drive of males sometimes motivates them to perform acts that cannot possibly result in offspring. Male elephant seals not uncommonly attempt to copulate with young pups only a month or two old while males of some species of bees work themselves into a sexual frenzy over a deceased female or even a part of her body. Human males engaged in masturbation, oral and anal sex, and sex with children, to name just a few of the sexual activities that no one has ever claimed will generally result in surviving offspring.

On the other hand, the adaptive conditional tactic hypothesis for rape is also plausible because rape appears to be associated with both low socioeconomic status and low risk of punishment, two conditions that would tend to increase the fitness benefit to fitness cost ratio of rape for certain individuals acting under certain circumstances. For example, poor men may have much less opportunity to engage in successful courtship because women favor wealthier individuals; rape could enable some in this category to gain sexual access to women. The mean fitness benefit from rape need not be great for individuals who have little or no chance of forming a partnership with a willing woman. Likewise, when rape occurs with little risk of punishment, as has traditionally been the case for soldiers in combat, then the fitness benefit need not be great to outweigh the relatively low costs associated with the behavior, which is indeed widespread in times of war.

Debate continues on these alternatives because definitive tests needed to discriminate between them have yet to be carried out. But both hypotheses are based on the premise that rape is linked to evolved psychological mechanisms that contributed more, not less, to the chances of successful reproduction by men in the ancestral hominid environment. This premise is testable. For example, both hypotheses could be dismissed if it were shown that raped women in the past could not have borne children as a result of the assault. However, even in modern populations where birth control and abortion are available, some rape victims do become pregnant and bear the rapist's child. In addition, both hypotheses yield the prediction that rapists will especially target women of reproductive age. Tests of this prediction have also been positive with the age distribution of raped women heavily skewed toward the years of peak fertility. Yes, a small proportion of the victim population consists of women either too young or too old to bear children, but the chance that a twenty-four-year-old will be raped is somewhere between four and twenty times greater than the risk that a fifty-four-year-old will be sexually assaulted. And note that the age distribution of women subject to homicidal attack is quite different from that of rape victims, a result that further reduces whatever residual attraction might be associated with the rape has nothing to do with sex hypothesis. If rape were unadulterated violence designed to brutalize women, one would expect convergence in the age distributions of rape and homicide victims. The convergence does not exist. (see figure next page)

What are the implications of these findings for persons who want to reduce the frequency of rape by educating potential rapists? The rape-is-not-sex theorists would have us tell these individuals that rape occurs strictly as a result of a male desire to dominate and humiliate women. The logic of this argument dictates that as long as a man felt sexual desire while interacting with a woman, then he could convince himself (falsely) that whatever he did could not constitute rape. I do not believe that this outcome is desirable, nor is it helpful to those who would like to make rape less common in human societies.

Instead let me review an anti-rape program based on the idea of Randy Thornhill and Craig Palmer, whose recent book on rape ignited a brief but intense firestorm, reminiscent of the original response to *Sociobiology* in many ways. Indeed, the critics of Thornhill and Palmer's book revived all

the standard objections that have been aimed against sociobiology over the years, and they stated them with the same venom and ridicule that characterized the initial assault on Wilson. Thus, for Barbara Ehrenreich, the authors of *The Natural History of Rape*

presented “a

daffy new theory,” as if Thornhill and Palmer had invented something out of thin air instead of employing the standard Darwinian approach. Likewise, Jerry Coyne employed a well tried, if somewhat tired, tactic, when he subtitled his attack “The Fairy Tale of Evolutionary Psychology” and claimed that the book “becomes one more sociobiological ‘just-so’ story – the kind of tale that evolutionists swap over a few beers at the faculty club”.

The eagerness of the critics to marginalize the evolutionary approach to rape and to disparage those with whom they disagree presumably arises from their belief that it would be bad for society to entertain the possibility of an evolutionary theory of rape. Far better, according to these persons, to stick to such notions as “rape is not about sex” and “all rapists are criminally violent individuals.” Coyne, for one, appears to acknowledge that these assertions are not necessarily true, but he lets the matter slide: “one must remember that they originated not as scientific propositions but as political slogans deemed necessary to reverse popular misconceptions about rape”.

But is it a good idea to base a desirable social goal – a reduction in rape – on a scientifically indefensible claim? Steven Pinker does not think so: “It is a bad idea to say that war, violence, rape, and greed are bad because humans are not naturally inclined to them”. And I agree with Pinker because, as he points out, such a proposition implies that (1) any number of highly undesirable human behaviors would have to be accepted if it were shown that they were natural in the sense of having an evolved basis or that (2) evolutionary scientists should conceal or misrepresent their findings.

But what if evolutionary data, rather than ideological strategy, were used to develop a high school rape prevention program (yes, I know the certain response of a school board to such a program, but permit me to dream on). My course would instruct young men that past selection has burdened them with a genetic heritage which made it probable they would develop a certain kind of sexual psychology, one that may have promoted reproductive success in the past but one that can also have various unfortunate consequences in the present, some of them sure to be judged immoral or illegal. In particular, the great interest in sexual relations and extreme ease of sexual arousal that made our male ancestors less likely to miss opportunities to copulate and have children can lead some men today to engage in a spectrum of coercive activities, ranging from pleading for sex with potential partners, to

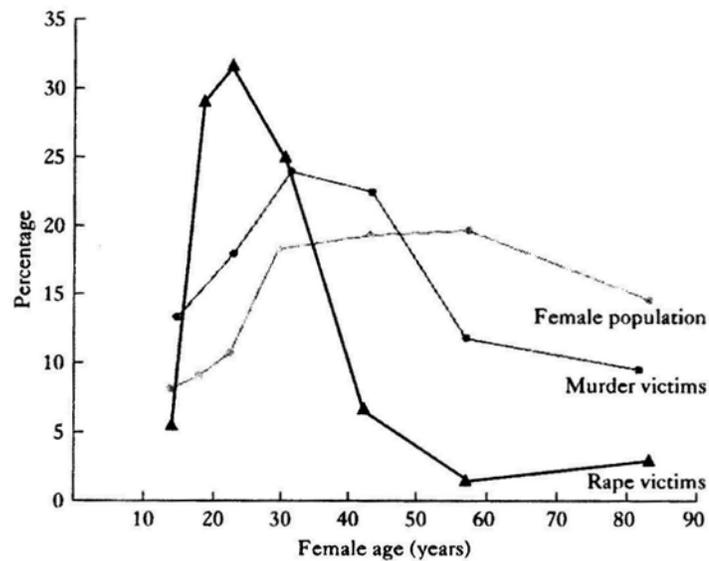


Figure 9.5. The age distribution of rape victims differs significantly from that of homicide victims. Young women of relatively high fertility are at special risk of being raped. From [312].

subjecting dates to unpleasant psychological pressure, to employing mild physical force with female companions leading to date rape, to the violent sexual assault of women known or unknown to the rapists, some of whom may indeed be genuine psychopaths. My sociobiologically based education program would also explain why male psychological mechanisms make it easy for the sexually coercive male to justify his actions and to overlook the great emotional damage that his behavior causes women.

The ultimate reason why women find behavior that thwarts freedom of mate choice so distressing and devastating would be placed on the table in front of those attending my sociobiological sex education class. In the past, rape almost certainly imposed a major fitness cost on women, and the same is generally true in the present. As noted, raped women sometimes do become pregnant, which may cause current husbands to abandon them rather than care for a child fathered by another male. Even if the raped woman avoids producing a child by the rapist, the event, if known to a husband, may actually generate hostility rather than sympathy, such is the nature of the evolved male brain, with its adaptive but cruelly paranoid tendencies when it comes to the risk of caring for offspring other than one's own. Given the damaging fitness consequences of being raped, selection has favored women in the past who did their very best to avoid this fate. One product of selection of this sort has been the psychological mechanisms that generate emotional pain when rape occurs. Such psychological systems may motivate the raped woman to avoid the situation that resulted in her victimization; more importantly, the extreme distress of the rape victim may also communicate convincingly to her social partner, if she has one, that she truly was a victim and in no way cooperated with the rapist.

With these basics in mind, our now partially educated young men would be informed that they need not permit their evolved psyches, which are after all working on behalf of their genes, to lead them into actions that could cause others such unhappiness. They must realize that the male drive to have sex will often greatly exceed that of their female companions. Moreover, their eagerness can cause them to misinterpret the intentions of others, to take a smile or a friendly comment as a signal of sexual receptivity when this may be the last thing on the woman's mind. Since they now understand these things, they can be on guard against the pernicious effects of past natural selection, an unfeeling process with some exceedingly unpleasant effects, which everyone needs to know about.

Moreover, our now somewhat more evolutionarily conscious young men could be told that there is no reason they cannot overcome certain damaging psychological predispositions that selection has favored. In fact, every day people all over the globe defeat the ultimate "wishes" of their naturally selected genes because natural selection has also given us a modicum of rationality. I speak from some personal experience here. Although my brain has been designed by selection to motivate me to do that which would result in having as many surviving offspring as possible (at least in the ancestral environment of humans), I have not let evolution push me around. My wife and I made the decision to have only two children, although we almost certainly could have had more. In employing a vasectomy as a means of achieving reproductive restraint, I am not alone.

That humans are not robots whose every action advances the welfare of our genes stems from several factors. As noted in previous chapters, our gene's survival is dependent upon proximate mechanisms that motivate us to do things which were only correlated with gene propagation in the past, and never perfectly correlated. Our genes do not control us directly but instead influence the development of psychological mechanisms that typically operate with rules of thumb that usually, but not always, generate adaptive responses in certain environments. We have, moreover, changed the human environment from its ancestral condition in part because of the technological spinoffs from scientific discoveries that were made thanks to certain evolved features of our brains. As a result, our decision-making rules of thumb now express themselves in an environment far different from the ancestral one, which makes it less likely that our actions will benefit our genes. I could therefore hope to change the behavior of the young men in my sociobiological sex education class by providing them information unknown to their ancestors. I would suggest to them, "You can combat the dictatorship of

your evolved psyches. The next time your hormones take over, remember that you can behave adaptively in evolutionary terms, in other words, often like a bozo or worse, you can fight those evolved impulses when they threaten to damage someone else, a result that has grave consequences for your own welfare as well.” I would point out to my class that having been educated, they could no longer use ignorance as an excuse, should they choose to engage in sexually coercive behavior of any sort.

Having seen John Cleese (in the highly philosophical movie *The Meaning of Life*) fail miserably when he tried to teach the finer points of sexual intercourse by example to a class of young men, despite his best efforts and those of his partner, I doubt that a sociobiological version of a sex education class would dramatically alter the behavior of the adolescents in the course. But it might be worth a try.

If given the chance, I would also have a go at educating young women as well. I’d tell young women, as well as young men, that evolutionary theory is worth knowing about because it helps to have an accurate understanding of human nature. I’d also point out that because the fitness interests of the two sexes are not identical, and sometimes are in direct conflict, male and female sexual psychologies are not the same. And I’d tell the women an anecdote that provides a sobering view of the enormity of the difference. One of the major supermarket chains instructed its checkout workers, generally women, to look the customer in the eye and smile when handing over the receipt and change, while saying, “Thanks Mr. (or Mrs.) X for shopping at Safeway.” Female employees soon petitioned management to please let them skip the eye-contact-with-smile routine because so many men instantly interpreted their behavior as a come-on of some sort, which led them to make “reciprocal” sexual invitations to the checkout clerks. Which tells you something about men, namely, that they almost always view women of reproductive age as potential sex objects (no matter what they say in the interest of political correctness or a desire to deceive women or to ingratiate themselves with possible sexual partners.) It cannot hurt to know this fact of life, and a few others, such as the willingness of even nice guys to resort to coercive tactics to secure sex. As Robert Wright has pointed out, women really should take the time to Know the Enemy.

I am not kidding myself that schools in North America will soon be clamoring for evolutionarily informed sex education class nor do I believe that an understanding of natural selection would usher in a golden age of societal tranquility. But at the very least, if people really did understand what evolutionary theory was all about, perhaps they would know that “natural” or “evolved” traits were neither inevitable nor necessarily desirable from a personal or societal perspective. No one is under obligation to accept our evolved attributes as moral necessities. As the evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins says, “My own philosophy of life begins with an explicit rejection of Darwinism as a normative principle for living, even while I extol it as the explanatory principle for life”.

The great evolutionist George C. Williams is even more emphatic: “With what other than condemnation is a person with any real sense to respond to a system in which the ultimate purpose in life is to be better than your neighbor at getting genes into future generations”. As Williams points out, those parasitic organisms that cause disease are beautifully adapted in ways that benefit their genes while causing immense distress and pain in their victims. The fact that interactions among the members of the same species are also guided by adaptations of various sorts is no guarantee of happiness and harmony, as dysfunctional step-families and couples in sexual conflict demonstrate all too clearly. If more people realized how our naturally selected brain acts in the service of our genes, then perhaps they would be less inclined to endure the consequences of natural selection a blind process that care not a whit about human beings or anything else.