

Women's Sexual Strategies: More Common (and Diverse) than We Think?

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The literature on human mating strategies emphasizes gender differences in the pursuit of short-term sexual strategies. In particular, women are believed to be most concerned with pursuing long-term sexual partners, because of the greater parental investment that women make in their offspring (Buss & Schmitt, 1993; Laumann et al., 1994; Oliver & Hyde, 1993). We accept the premise of Parental Investment Theory (Travis & Yeagers, 1991; Trivers, 1972), but take issue with the empirical studies that are used to support Buss and Schmitt's (1993) Sexual Strategies Theory (SST), and with the extent of the purported difference between the genders.

All empirical studies of gender differences in preferences for casual sex have been conducted with college students. Even in the current era, young women reach sexual maturity under the backdrop of the sexual double standard, in which sex outside of a committed relationship is stigmatized. For men, losing their virginity is often a positive event (Holland, Ramazanoglu, Sharpe, & Thomson, 2000), but for women the initiation of sexual activity may be associated with loss, guilt, regret, and other negative affective experiences (Moore & Davidson, 1997; Resneck-Sannes, 1991; Schwartz, 1993; Travis & White, 2000). College-aged may need to protect their reputation, and may be realistically concerned about the high prevalence of STDs within their cohort (Aral, 2001; Bustamante, 1993), to which women are more susceptible than men. They may therefore be more conservative in their actual or reported behavior.

Women are more at risk than men for childhood sexual abuse (CSA), sexual assault, and intimate partner violence, with estimates ranging between 15% and 34% for CSA alone (Spitzberg, 1999; Vogeltanz et al., 1999). These events often have a detrimental impact on women's sexuality and mental health (Coker et al., 2002; Cloutier, Martin, & Poole, 2002).

Evolutionary psychologists sometimes claim that society's preoccupation with female chastity and restriction of young women's sexual behavior occurs because women's families needed to ensure their chastity to provide her husband with paternity certainty. But the fact that societies had to take drastic steps such as concealment, and excision of the clitoris indicates that women's natural behavior would be less chaste were she not so controlled. SST ignores the trend towards more permissive sexual behaviors that has been observed through much of the twentieth century, which indicates a substantial influence of societal factors (Hunt, 1974; Klassen, Williams, & Levitt, 1989; Reiss, 1960; Schmidt, 1982; Sprecher, McKinney, & Orbach, 1987; Weinber, Swensson, & Hammersmith, 1983).

The narrow focus on college populations ignores the observation that for some women of childbearing age, sexual desire actually increases with age (Haellstroem & Samuelsson, 1990; Weiderman, 2001). There is some evidence women become less choosy as they age (Sousa Campos, Otta, & Siqueira, 2002). It would be advantageous from an evolutionary perspective for women's sex drives to increase as they get closer to menopause. As they are older and thus less attractive to potential suitors and also beginning to be less capable of becoming pregnant, they may need to more aggressively pursue a mate than when they were younger, more fertile, and suitors were plentiful.

Evolutionary psychologists have ignored the possibility that women's sexual strategies may change over the lifespan. Being less choosy may be advantageous for older women; as there are fewer unpaired men around to choose from, they will be more likely to secure a mate if they relax their standards. In addition, younger women, because of less earning power and social status, must often acquire financial stability and resources through a mate. In contrast, because older women often have already accrued resources, their choice of mate is not as dependent on acquiring resources, and so they can afford to be less choosy. Short-term sexual strategies may also be less costly for older women, as they are more experienced and thus there is less chance that they would make unwise choices in short-term mating that would put them in danger.

In the literature it is recognized that men often pursue both simultaneously, but there is less attention to the fact that women have much to gain from short-term matings (Baker & Bellis, 1993; Greiling & Buss, 2000; Thornhill, Gangestad, & Comer, 1996). This is in contrast to the attention given to extra-pair copulation and the evolutionary advantages it may impart in the animal literature (Jennions & Petrie, 2000; Moller & Birkhead, 1991, 1993; Moller & Ninni, 1998; Peters, Astheimer, & Cockburn, 2001).

We argue that observed differences represent what Wilson (1984) referred to as cultural hypertrophy of biological gender dimorphism, meaning that cultural influences exaggerates basic differences that evolved under adaptive pressure. While acknowledging the merit of the existing work on evolutionary approaches to sexual selection, the authors of this paper propose that SST is at best a partially correct window into human sexual behavior rather than being a completely accurate model. Researchers need to develop alternative models of sexual selection that pay more attention to the psychology of women's mating strategies.