

EVOLUTIONARY EXPLANATIONS OF INFIDELITY AND JEALOUSY

According to evolutionary psychologists, some aspects of human aggression may have their origins in the challenges our ancestors faced millions of years ago. One consequence of aggression is that it would deter other males from approaching a female partner, and therefore enable us to reproduce with that person and pass on our genes. Aggression can therefore be seen as an *adaptive* behaviour which has been naturally selected.

A brief introduction to sexual selection in males and females

Buss (1989) asked 10,000 people, from 37 cultures in 6 continents and 5 islands, what they look for in a prospective partner (*'intersexual selection'*). Some characteristics were valued by both sexes. These included *intelligence* (leads to more skilful parenting), *kindness* (greater commitment to a long-term relationship) and *dependability* (likely to help in times of trouble). However, there were differences between men and women as well. Men identified *physical attractiveness* and *youth* as the most important characteristics in a woman. Women, however, identified a man's *ability to provide resources* as the most important characteristic.



Men and women have different reasons for selecting a partner

According to evolutionary psychologists, physical attractiveness and youth indicate *health*, and therefore *fertility* and *reproductive ability*. These are the most important characteristics a man seeks in a woman, because a man's adaptive issue is to find a mate and hold on to her in order to produce lots of offspring which ensure that his genes are passed on to the next generation.

A woman's adaptive issue is to find a man with resources and hold on to him. This will enable her offspring to be cared for in the long-term. This is why *resource potential* (good *financial prospects*, *ambition*, and *industriousness*) is the most important characteristic a woman looks for in a man. Men and women,

then, use different criteria in sexual selection, based on what would be 'best' for them.

Infidelity

Infidelity is when a sexual partner is unfaithful. *Sexual infidelity* is any behaviour involving sexual contact (from kissing to intercourse). *Emotional infidelity* is forming an emotional attachment to (or showing affection for) another person (from flirting to falling in love). Infidelity is, perhaps, surprisingly common. Whilst 99% of married people expect their spouse to be faithful, 11% of women and 21% of men admit to extra-marital sex.



Infidelity can be sexual or emotional

Evolutionary theory proposes that both forms of infidelity are distressing to men and women, but that men should be more distressed by sexual infidelity than emotional infidelity, whereas women should be more distressed by emotional infidelity than sexual infidelity. The difference is based on the different adaptive issues faced by men and women.

For men, the most pressing issue is *uncertain paternity*. Until recently, a man could not be certain that he was an offspring's father, and so risked investing in something that wasn't genetically his. Women, of course, are certain of maternity. For them, the most pressing issue is a partner's emotional involvement with another woman, since this could lead to him leaving and investing his resources in her.

There is evidence to support this. **Buss et al (1999)** asked men and women which of the following would cause them most distress: (1) Your partner forming a deep emotional attachment to another person, but with no sexual involvement, or (2) Your partner enjoying passionate sexual intercourse with another person, but with no emotional involvement. The data are shown below:

% Reporting Greater Distress

	Emotional Infidelity	Sexual infidelity
Men	39	61
Women	87	13

(The above data are supported by a meta-analysis of 32 other studies asking the same questions)

However, there is an alternative way of explain these differences between men and women. According to the '**Double Shot Hypothesis**', a person will be most distressed by the one kind of infidelity that most clearly implies the occurrence of the other type of infidelity.

Men are thought to be capable of sex without emotional involvement, whereas women typically are not. Because men are able to have 'meaningless' sex, women should find emotional infidelity more distressing because it implies that he is also sexually involved. Men, however, should find sexual infidelity more distressing because it implies that a woman is also emotionally involved.

It should also be noted that 'infidelity' is not a straightforward concept. For example, if a man didn't consider emotional infidelity to actually be infidelity, then he wouldn't be particularly distressed by that kind of behaviour.

Other issues relate to methodology. Most studies use hypothetical scenarios. Since many people have experienced infidelity, it makes sense to ask them about their actual experiences. When **Harris (2003)** did exactly this, he found no difference between men and women and the extent to which they were distressed by each kind of infidelity. Furthermore, studies are typically 'forced-choice', with participants having to choose one or other kind of infidelity. However, when they are allowed to quantify how distressing each is, the difference between men and women disappears.

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Wife: I am sorry. I never meant to get caught, and if I knew you would find out I never would have done it. Next time I will be sure to go somewhere farther away. I will buy you a new kitten. I will let you shop all day if you want to. I will do that thing you like that I don't like. I am sorry. Please let me back in the house, or at least put my red beer cooler on the porch so I can pick it up. Love,
B.R.

Jealousy

As noted previously, a man's adaptive issue is to find a mate and hold on to her in order to produce lots of offspring. This would ensure that his genes were passed on to the next generation. For men, then, their biggest fear is that a partner will leave.



Jealousy is defined as "a state of fear caused by a real or imagined threat to a person's status as an exclusive partner". The most likely reason for male jealousy to occur is suspected sexual infidelity by his partner, and jealousy is therefore an adaptive response to the possibility to losing a fertile partner to someone else. In order to deter a partner from leaving, men (and, indeed, women) evolved various 'mate retention' strategies, including aggression. One of these is *mate guarding*, or *vigilance*.

In today's world, this strategy manifests itself in the form of prohibiting a partner from 'going out with the girls/lads' to checking text messages on their phone. Other include *debasement* ('going along with her every wish'), *intra-sexual threats* ('Where is he?, I'm going to beat him up'), *verbal possession signals* ('hands off, she's mine'), and *abandonment* ('I'm going back to my mother's').

Shackelford et al (2006) found that aggression by men towards women is positively correlated with two mate-retention strategies. These are '*intersexual negative inducements*' (e.g. shouting at her for looking at another man) and '*direct guarding*' (e.g. monopolising her time at a party). They also found that men who consistently use *emotional manipulation* (e.g. making the woman feel guilty or threatening suicide if she leaves) were more prone to use violence in their relationship. Note, though, that this is a correlational study, so must be treated cautiously.



Many children bear a striking resemblance to the milkman

As well as a partner leaving, men also face the problem of **cuckoldry**. This is when a woman deceives a man into investing in offspring that are not his. Although this is a risky behaviour for women (e.g. retaliation, the loss of the partner), it is even riskier for a man (loss of invested resources and reproductive opportunity). Sexual jealousy is an adaptive response to cuckoldry, because it prevents a female partner from mating with someone else.

Men employ several strategies to avoid cuckoldry. One of these is *sexual coercion*. This is when a man forces his partner to have sex with him ('partner rape'). A woman who is unwilling to have sex may be signalling that she has been sexually unfaithful which would, of course, increase the man's jealousy. Another strategy is *aggression*, since this would deter a female from indulging in a behaviour that was not in her male partner's interests.

There is a large amount of evidence suggesting that aggression is linked to sexual jealousy. For example, **Dobash & Dobash (1984)** found that female victims of domestic violence ('battered wives') frequently identified sexual jealousy as the cause. Of women who reported 'direct guarding' by their partner, 72% had required medical attention following an assault by that partner. In 58 of 214 murders (24%), sexual jealousy was the motive. Finally, attempts by men to constrain female sexual behaviour by using, or threatening to use, physical violence appears to be culturally universal.

Evidence also supports the view that sexual coercion is linked to sexual jealousy. For example, research indicates that the risk of a partner's infidelity predicts the likelihood of sexual coercion by men, but not by women. This makes sense - men can be cuckolded, women can't. Research also shows that men who use sexual coercion are more likely to report believing that their partner was

being unfaithful. Additionally, women who have been sexually coerced are more likely to admit to being unfaithful.

If we accept an evolutionary explanation of aggression, it implies that male aggression is inevitable. However, in most modern societies extreme levels of aggression are likely to be maladaptive rather than adaptive, since violent individuals are removed from society. The fact that many murderers commit suicide is also hardly maximizing their reproductive fitness!