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Evolutionary Psychology and Marital Conflict: The Relevance of Stepchildren

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The specific focus of this chapter concerns one particular source of conflict between women and men in marital or marital-like relationships, namely the existence or presence of children from prior unions. In explaining our rationale for suggesting that such children might be expected to engender or exacerbate marital conflict, however, we have to synopsize theories of much broader applicability. Our argument is predicated on a more general account of the nature of the marital relationship from the perspective of evolutionary biology, which in turn is predicated on a still more general evolutionary understanding of the nature of sociality and of the male-female phenomenon. Thus, we start with these most basic issues and work toward the specific question of the possible relevance of stepchildren to marital disharmony.

NATURAL SELECTION AND ADAPTATION

To attain a deep understanding of the relationship between women and men, it seems to us essential that the issue be situated within larger biological issues, namely the comparative characterization of the human animal and the general significances of sex and sociality, in the living world.

The unifying conceptual framework of the life sciences is the theory of evolution by selection. Human beings and other organisms are extremely complex systems, and it has long been evident that the complex adaptive organization of living creatures requires explanation. Pre-Darwinian thinkers (e.g., Paley, 1802) could see no alternative to the hypothesis that one or more

creatures analogous to ourselves, but unimaginably more powerful, must have designed and created terrestrial life. Such “creationist” theories were obviously unsatisfactory since they begged the question of the sources of the alleged creators' complexity and thus solved nothing, and since they were devoid of testable implications that would enable one to choose among the numerous competing versions. But no one had a better solution until Charles Darwin and Alfred Russel Wallace (1858) announced their independent discovery of the natural process that generates complex adaptation automatically and without intentionality: Random variation is ceaselessly generated in populations of reproducing organisms and is then winnowed by nonrandom differential survival and reproduction, with the result that the more successful forms proliferate while their alternatives perish, and adaptive complexity is cumulative over generations. Darwin called this process, which has since been amply confirmed and elaborated in each of its essentials, *natural selection*.

It is crucial to note that Darwinian selection is not just a matter of differential survival, as might be inferred from its popular epitomization as “survival of the fittest.” Over generations, it is successful attributes that “survive,” not individuals, and this sort of long-term survival depends not merely on the longevity of those with a given attribute, but on the abundance of their progeny. Suppose, for example, that a new, combative mutant variety of male were to appear in a population of pacifists and that the new mutant variety were to fertilize more females than the pacifist variety, on average, despite tending to die younger. In such a case, the mutation would spread through the population over generations and male lifespan would decline. The point of this little thought experiment is not that aggressivity must supplant pacifism; on the contrary, we could just as easily have framed the hypothetical case in such a way that the pacifists won out, and indeed there are both combative and pacifist equilibria in natural animal populations. Rather, the general point is that adaptive attributes of living creatures have been “designed” by the Darwinian historical process to contribute to a single outcome: outreproducing other members of one's species (sometimes called *fitness*) in environments whose relevant aspects are not crucially different from those in which the history of selection has occurred.

Every living creature has been shaped by such a history of Darwinian selection and so has every complex functioning constituent part of every living creature. Thus, the “adaptationist” enterprise of elucidating the evolved functional designs of organisms and their constituent parts is the cornerstone of biological discovery and always was, even before Darwin's theory made it evident *why* this strategy of functional parsing of the organism works (Mayr, 1983). For a highly readable, book-length elaboration of modern adaptationism, see Dawkins (1986).

WOMEN AND MEN IN COMPARATIVE BIOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE

Given this little introduction to evolution, consider the human animal in comparative perspective. People readily characterize their species as a relatively

hairless primate, as unusually bipedal, complexly social, and so forth, characterizations that entail implicit or explicit comparison to other animal species, not necessarily limited to closely related ones. It is also popular to attempt to “define” our species by its apparent uniqueness: *Homo* the tool user, the toolmaker, the user of arbitrary referential signs, and so forth. These attributes have an unsettling history of losing their uniqueness as knowledge of other animals accumulates, but there is little doubt that the human animal is indeed exceptional in its language, complex culture, and other attributes. However, there is much more to the business of situating human beings in comparative perspective than cataloging our peculiarities.

The first thing to note about *Homo sapiens* as a species is that people reproduce sexually. This may seem trite, but not all creatures reproduce sexually, and the fact of sexual reproduction has some profound implications. Unlike ourselves, asexual organisms produce offspring that are genetically identical to the mother, with the result that whatever resource allocations or other states of affairs (e.g., habitats occupied, foods selected, social circumstances preferred, etc.) are optimal for maternal fitness will necessarily be optimal for offspring fitness, too, since the mother's and the offspring's fitnesses are isomorphic. In sexual reproducers, by contrast, the lack of genetic identity between parent and offspring makes “parent-offspring conflict” (Trivers, 1974) endemic: The resource allocations and other states of affairs that would maximize parental fitness are *not* identical to those that would maximize offspring fitness.

The consequence of this conflict in the natural selective structure of sexual reproduction is that parental and offspring attributes necessarily evolve not simply to complement each other, but also, to some degree, to counter each other. These considerations have innumerable consequences for maternal and infantile physiology and psychology, as illustrated by Haig's (1993) remarkable exposition of how “maternal-fetal conflict” plays itself out in the specific case of human beings.

Besides engendering parent-offspring conflict, sexual reproduction introduces an additional social relationship, namely that between mates. Because preferences have been shaped by selection to promote expected fitness and because the well-being, survival, and eventual reproduction of an offspring contribute to the fitness of both its parents, the resource allocations and other states of affairs that appeal to one parent are likely to have appeal for the other as well. In this sense, there is a fundamental commonality of purpose between mates, which is—like the commonality of purpose between parent and child or other genetic relatives—ultimately traceable to correlated fitnesses. However, the relationship between mates also entails endemic conflicts, which are again—as in the parent-offspring relationship—ultimately traceable to the genetic nonidentity of the participants. In particular, the fact that both parties accrue expected fitness from either's investments in the welfare of their joint offspring opens the door to the evolution of “parasitic” exploitation of one sex's reproductive efforts by the other sex and thus to escalated “evolutionary arms races” between the sexes. These conflicts apply to all sexual reproducers, from single-cell organisms to ourselves.

The second thing to note about *Homo sapiens* in comparative biological perspective is that people are *dioecious*: Individuals come in two varieties, female and male, and successful reproduction requires one of each. Not all sexually reproducing creatures are dioecious, and the considerations just discussed, including parasitic exploitation of a mate and evolutionary arms races, apply just as much to monomorphic hermaphrodites (e.g., Fischer, 1988) as they apply to bimorphic dioecious species such as people. The additional twist that dioecy adds is the evolution of two distinct morphs, with distinct attributes that are partly complementary and partly antagonistic.

In dioecious organisms, the female is, by definition, the sex that produces the larger gamete: Eggs are bigger than sperm. One consequence is that in cases in which internal fertilization (the union of parental gametes inside one parent's body) has evolved—as it has done many times independently—it almost invariably occurs within the female. This in turn sets the evolutionary stage for the sexually differentiated elaboration of additional modes of internal nurturance, such as mammalian pregnancy and lactation, with the female literally left holding the baby. This sexual differentiation of the evolved mechanisms of “parental investment” (Trivers, 1972) opens the door to the evolution of parasitic exploitation of the female's reproductive efforts by the male: Females commonly invest vastly more time and energy in the nurturance of each offspring than do males, who can disappear after conception and still gain the full fitness benefit of successfully raised young. Various sex differences in the psychophysiological paraphernalia that we call *sexuality* (e.g., Symons, 1979) follow logically from this asymmetry.

In other words, insofar as reproductive efforts can be partitioned into the pursuit of matings versus parental investment (Trivers, 1972; Low, 1978), males in taxa with internal fertilization generally specialize in the former and females in the latter. One significant implication is that the principal factor limiting male fitness is often the number of mating partners, whereas female fitness seldom profits analogously from increased numbers of mating partners and is instead generally limited by nutrient availability. Since the minimal time and energy cost of producing a viable offspring is much lower for a male than for a female, the ceiling on potential reproduction is higher. Hence, the variance in reproductive success is usually higher for males (*effective polygyny*; see Daly & Wilson, 1983, pp. 151-152) and the proportion who die childless is also higher, engendering more intense male-male competition and the selective favoring of more expensive, dangerous, and competitive tactics. That is why musculature and specialized weaponry for same-sex combat are so often sexually differentiated. Moreover, insofar as males are specialized morphologically and psychologically for violent competition with other males, and insofar as male fitness is largely determined by the frequency and exclusivity of mating access, it is hardly surprising that males also commonly apply their aptitude in violent conflict to the task of direct aggressive control of the females themselves. It is also noteworthy—and, without an evolutionary perspective, paradoxical—that greater size and aggressivity of males tend to be associated with greater vulnerability to extraspecific threats of starvation, disease, and even

predation, as the demands of intrasexual competitive prowess compromise male design efficiency with respect to other aspects of the ecological niche of the species (e.g., Gaulin & Sailer, 1985).

This generic characterization must immediately be tempered, however, by the recognition of considerable cross-species diversity. The extent to which male mammals have higher fitness variance, grow larger, die younger, and otherwise differ from females varies greatly even among quite closely related species, and these various aspects of sexual differentiation are apparently strongly correlated with one another. Most notably, wherever pairs remain together and care for their young cooperatively—as foxes and various monkeys and beavers and a smattering of other mammals do—these sex differences are diminished or abolished. Such biparental care is atypical in mammals and other animals with internal fertilization, presumably at least partly, because it is difficult for males in such cases to have reliable cues of paternity, with the result that fathers are vulnerable to *cuckoldry* (unwitting investment in young sired by rivals) and paternal investment is therefore *evolutionarily unstable*.

The third thing to note about *Homo sapiens* in comparative perspective then—and the first in which we differ from closely related species—is that people form mateships of some stability with biparental investment in young. Our nearest relatives, chimpanzees and gorillas, cleave much closer to the mammalian stereotype, with males very much larger than females and parental investment predominantly or solely maternal.

Admittedly, ours is hardly an exemplary monogamous species. The prevalence of adulterous fantasy and action demonstrates that marriage does not abolish interest in the opposite sex, and the same is implied by the ubiquity of countermeasures to adultery (e.g., Wilson & Daly, 1992a). Moreover, the ethnographic record reveals that men are ardent polygamists when the opportunity presents itself: In the majority of known human societies—including all those who subsist by foraging, as all people did until the relatively recent invention of agriculture—most marriages are (at least serially) monogamous, and yet some men of high status manage to have multiple wives simultaneously (Betzig, 1986). Nor does it seem quite correct to claim, as did Dorothy Parker, that woman's nature is monogamous even if man's is not (e.g., Baker & Bellis, 1989, 1993), although women are clearly less polygamously inclined than men (Daly & Wilson, 1983).

The human animal exhibits a number of sex differences that may be interpreted as evolutionary vestiges of a selective history as an effectively polygynous species—that is, as a species in which male fitness has generally been more variable than female fitness and hence intrasexual competition has generally been more intense among males than among females. These vestiges include sex differences in body size, in maturation schedules, in intrasexual combat, and in rates of senescence. In all of these, the sexes differ more in human beings than in monogamous mammals, but much less than in extremely polygynous mammals such as bison or various seals or our cousins the great apes. Likely implications are that the human species evolved as a slightly polygynous one, and, more specifically, that pair formation with biparental

care is an ancient hominid adaptation but that competitively ascendant men continued to be polygamists. And that, of course, is also what is suggested by the ethnographic record of marriage practices epitomized above.

MARITAL ALLIANCE IS A PANHUMAN INSTITUTION

In all societies, women and men enter into individualized marital alliances, which entail entitlements and obligations recognized and acknowledged by the marrying couple and by others.

A central component of marital alliance is that it bestows legitimate sexual access (often, but not always, exclusive). Not coincidentally, marriage is also the relationship within which reproduction is deemed legitimate, normal, or appropriate, and marriage entails the expectation that the couple's reciprocal obligations will extend far beyond conception. In other words, the relationship between marital partners develops, in the event of reproduction, into a relationship of biparental obligations. Moreover, marital alliance is the relationship that determines and/or legitimizes the cross-generational transfer of heritable material and social resources.

Many writers have maintained that because human marriage is an economic as well as a reproductive union—or even because it is primarily or fundamentally economic in its motivations—it is therefore unique and incommensurate with the merely reproductive partnerships of other animal species. Such claims are predicated on ignorance of the lives of nonhuman animals and on misunderstanding of the nature of the relationship between production and reproduction. All animals accumulate and allocate resources, hence engage in “economic” activities. These activities may often have priority over reproductive activities in the limited sense that sex and reproduction are matters to which animals turn their attention only when material concerns are adequately under control. But reproduction has priority over production in another sense: Economic activities and motives have come into existence and have been shaped over evolutionary time as means to reproductive ends.

In addition to the economics of individual life, sexual reproduction commonly entails complex accessory exchanges. A male hornbill forages and feeds his mate while she sits on their tree-hole nest incubating their eggs. A pair of beavers cooperatively maintains their dam and domicile throughout the winter. These unions, with their divisions of labor and exchanges of benefits, are neither more nor less economic than the relationship between human husbands and wives. In nonhuman animals, as in people, the mundane interactions of mated pairs seldom serve immediately reproductive purposes, and yet the union itself and the partners reciprocities can only be understood as predicated on reproductive partnership. (What *is* exceptional about human marriage is the degree of involvement of parties other than the marriage partners themselves in these economic exchanges.)

The cross-culturally general features of marital alliance add up to a complex panhuman institution. To be sure, many additional details of marriage

vary between times and places and even between segments of the population, including the specific obligations and entitlements of wives, husbands, and other interested parties; whether the start of a marriage is marked by a discrete ceremonial event; the number of simultaneous marital partners permitted to each sex; rules of marital eligibility; the legitimacy and prevalence of marital dissolution; and even whether marriage partners reside together. But acknowledgment of this diversity should not distract us from recognition of the core phenomenon. The enduring aspect of marriage and its attendant implication of biparental obligations contrast with the usual mammalian state of affairs. Admittedly, marriages fail, but, unlike most mammalian sexual alliances, they are nowhere entered into with the expectation or intent of dissolution when conception or some other reproductive landmark has been attained. Notwithstanding its variable aspects, then, marriage is everywhere intelligible as a socially recognized alliance between a woman and a man, instituted and acknowledged as a vehicle for producing and rearing children.

MARITAL CONFLICT

If marriage is fundamentally to be understood as a cooperative reproductive venture in which the joint offspring are equally the vehicles of both parties' fitness prospects, whence comes marital conflict? Insofar as marital harmony derives ultimately from correlated expected fitnesses, then marital disharmony may be expected to derive from phenomena that tend to counter that correlation. Unfortunately, the list of potential threats to correlated fitness, and hence to harmony between mates, is substantial.

One reason that reproductive partnership does not impart perfect commonality of interests is that personal reproduction is only one component of expected fitness (Hamilton, 1964). One's impacts on the reproduction of one's relatives affect fitness, too. Marriage partners have separate kindred, in whom they are likely to retain their benevolent interests, and each may then resent the other's continued "nepotistic" investment of time, attention, and material resources in collateral kin. This is the evolutionary theoretical gloss on a cross-culturally ubiquitous and widely recognized source of marital friction: in-laws.

Moreover, even if marriage partners eschew collateral nepotism, their reproductive alliance may be fragile. If both parties want out, conflict may be minimal, but the inclination to separate is probably more often asymmetrical. This can arise because the partners have—or perceive themselves to have—different "mate values" in the marriage market and hence unequal opportunities for striking a better deal (e.g., Buss & Schmitt, 1993). When the woman is the partner for whom separation is relatively tempting, the man may resort to violent coercion to deter and retain her (e.g., Wilson & Daly, 1993).

Regardless of whether either party is tempted to end the marriage, there may be conflict over the husband's inclination to be a polygamist, when feasible. More generally, even monogamously married men are often tempted to

allocate resources to extramarital mating effort rather than to the wife and her children. This, of course, is one major source of wifely grievance about inequitable investment in the marriage and may again contribute to asymmetrical inclination to end the marriage.

More generally, power asymmetries and resultant dissatisfactions are important direct sources of conflict and important contributors to asymmetrical inclinations to separate, too. One partner, usually the wife, is apt to be tempted to terminate the marriage because unequal power within the relationship sustains an asymmetry of investment in the couples joint venture that the less powerful partner finds unacceptable and irremediable. In a sense, this is the same issue as that of male parasitism of female parental investment discussed above; however, by invoking these specifically reproductive conflicts, we do not imply that the detailed substance of marital discord must reflect them directly. Rather, we are invoking reproductive partnership and conflicts as the natural selective underpinnings of the psychology of sexual partnership, but it is again necessary to note that although the couple's joint venture is functionally reproductive, its substance includes all the mundane business of subsistence. Wives' grievances about exploitative asymmetry in marriage (e.g., Friedan, 1963) clearly encompass more content domains than just inequities in the sharing of parental duties.

One way in which the functional centrality of reproduction in marital partnership is reflected is in the emotional force attached to sexual and reproductive betrayals. The most explosively dangerous source of marital conflict is apparently wifely infidelity (Daly & Wilson, 1988c; Wilson & Daly, 1992a). This has always been an especially potent threat to a husband's fitness insofar as it entails risk that he will make a prolonged investment in the upbringing of unrelated children ("cuckoldry"), and this threat is presumably of evolutionary relevance to the fact that the jealousy of men is more focused on the copulatory act than is that of women (Buss, Larsen, Westen, & Semmelroth, 1992; Daly, Wilson, & Weghorst, 1982; Teismann & Masher, 1978).

And then, over and above the problems of in-laws, infidelity, inequitable power, and asymmetrical inclination to separate, there may be children of prior unions.

Stepchildren and Marital Conflict

We have been arguing that reproductive partners share a profound, beneficent interest in the welfare of their offspring. It follows that children of the present marriage are likely to be sources of spousal harmony rather than discord because they facilitate consensus on the crucial question of how the couple's resources should be allocated. Children from former mateships, on the other hand, are a potential source of conflict about resource allocation, especially, but not only, if they reside with the married couple.

These hypotheses are predicated on the assumption that parental psychologies can distinguish genetic children from stepchildren and tend to value the former more highly. It would be surprising to a Darwinian if this were not the

case since parental investment is a potentially valuable resource and selection must favor those psyches that succeed in allocating it discriminately where it will enhance parental fitness. Cues that offspring are indeed one's own constitute just one of several classes of cues of expected fitness that are processed by complex, evolved psychological adaptations of *discriminative parental solicitude* in animals (Daly & Wilson 1988a, 1994, 1995).

In addition to its theoretical plausibility, the idea that stepchildren might face discrimination gibes with folk understandings of human affairs. "Cruel stepparents" are staple characters in folklore from every corner of the globe (Thompson, 1955), and the prefix "step" evokes negative attributions in the contemporary Western world as well (e.g., Bryan, Coleman, Ganong, & Bryan, 1986; Fine, 1986). Remarkably, however, social scientists lacking a Darwinian perspective have never asked what, if any, basis in fact this negative "stereotype" of steprelationships might have.

Are parents more likely to neglect, assault, exploit, and otherwise mistreat their stepchildren than their genetic children? One might suppose that this rather obvious question would have received considerable attention during the explosion of child abuse research that followed Keinpe, Silverman, Steele, Droegemuller, and Silver's (1962) agenda-setting proclamation of "the battered-child syndrome." But it did not. The first published study addressing it was our demonstration (Wilson, Daly, & Weghorst, 1980) that stepchildren constituted an enormously higher proportion of child abuse victims in the United States than their numbers in the population-at-large would warrant. Much subsequent research (e.g., Creighton, 1985; Daly & Wilson, 1985, 1988a, 1988b, 1988c, 1991; Ferri, 1984; Flinn, 1988; Gordon, 1989; Hill & Kaplan, 1988; Russell, 1984; Wilson & Daly, 1987) has confirmed and extended these results, demonstrating that excess risk to stepchildren is cross-nationally ubiquitous, is not an artifact of poverty or any other suggested correlate of steprelationship, and extends to a variety of mistreatments but is especially extreme in the most assaultive and dangerous ones.

Conflict in steprelationships is not confined to the violent extremes assayed by child abuse and homicide samples. There is a large amount of literature on American stepfamilies, mainly dealing with volunteer subjects with middle-class backgrounds and relatively minor problems, and this literature has a single focus: the conflicts and dissatisfactions of stepfamily life and how people cope with them (see, e.g., Giles-Sims & Crosbie-Bumett, 1989; Ihinger-Tallman, 1988; Pasley & Ihinger-Tallman, 1987; Wilson & Daly, 1987). Lest we paint too bleak a picture, it is important to stress that people do cope, for the most part reasonably well. Some stepparents, albeit a minority, even feel able to profess to "love" their wards (Duberman, 1975). But, although steprelationships are by no means inevitably hostile, the extensive literature is unanimous that they are, on average, more distant, more conflictual, and less satisfying than the corresponding genetic parent-child relationships.

What then of the effect of stepchildren on the relationship between marriage partners? Not surprisingly, the evidence is that their effect is negative.

Studies of divorce, for example, indicate that each child of the present union is associated with a decrease in the marital-duration-specific likelihood of divorce for first and subsequent marriages alike, at least for the first few children, whereas each child of former unions is associated with an increase in that same divorce risk (Becker, Landes, & Michael, 1977; Mite & Booth, 1985). The mere presence of children is not the problem then; their effect on marital instability depends on their origins.

More direct investigations of marital conflict tell a story that is consistent with the divorce data. Messinger (1976), for example, asked remarried Canadians who had children from previous marriages to rank the areas of overt conflict in each of their marriages. Children and money topped the list of arenas of conflict in the remarriages, yet they were scarcely mentioned when her respondents considered the conflicts in their failed first marriages. Moreover, it is clear from Messinger's report that the crux of these conflicts over children and over money were the same: The genetic mother wanted more of the stepfather's resources invested in her children than he was inclined to volunteer. For other studies leading to much the same conclusion, see Hobart (1991), White & Booth (1985), and Wilson and Daly (1987).

Stepchildren and Violence Against Wives

An obvious question in light of the above discussion is whether the existence of children sired by previous partners is a risk factor for violence against wives. Again, as with the question of risk to stepchildren themselves, this hypothesis seems never to have occurred to researchers lacking a Darwinian perspective. A review by Hotaling and Sugarman (1986), for example, listed 97 proposed "risk markers" for violence against wives, but parenthood of children was overlooked. Daly and Wilson (1988c) raised the issue and reviewed the fragmentary evidence from studies of spousal homicide, but no direct study appeared for another five years.

The homicide data are certainly suggestive. Lundsgaarde (1977), for example, examined the police files for a one-year sample of Houston homicides and wrote a monograph that includes capsule accounts of 33 conjugal cases. In 11 of these synopses, the brief narrative happened to indicate that there was a stepchild in the household (usually as a witness). One in three—a minimal estimate, since Lundsgaarde evinced no particular interest in the phenomenon and included these facts incidentally—is almost certainly a much higher proportion of stephouseholds than would be expected by chance, but no population-at-large comparison is available. Stepchildren pop up with a similarly uncanny frequency in other descriptive studies of spousal homicides, too (e.g., Chimbos, 1978; Polk, 1994), but the evidence has remained impressionistic.

Daly, Singh, and Wilson (1993) finally addressed this question directly in a study not of homicide victimization, but of Canadian women seeking shelter from assaultive husbands at a women's refuge over a period of one year. Out of 170 such women who reported having one or more children less than 18 years of age and a male partner coresiding at the time of the shelter admission,

48 (28%) had at least one child sired by a previous partner, almost four times the number that should have been expected by chance on the basis of a survey of the local population served by the refuge. The existence of one or more children of the present union, in addition to the stepchild(ren), reduced this overrepresentation only slightly, if at all (Figure 1.1).

Even the results in Figure 1.1 do not demonstrate conclusively that women who have children from previous unions are especially often assaulted, however. An alternative hypothesis is that the data reflect different thresholds for making use of shelter services. This alternative is plausible in view of the fact that the stepchildren themselves face a much higher risk of violence, as noted above, so that their mothers have special cause to fear for their safety. When mothers who sought refuge at the shelter in the Daly et al. (1993) study were asked whether the children, too, had been assaulted, those with children sired by previous partners were much more likely to reply in the affirmative (Figure 1.2).

It must not be forgotten that mistreatment encompasses more than violent assaults. Children are much more likely to be misused as sexual objects by stepfathers than by genetic fathers (Creighton, 1985; Daly, & Wilson, 1985; Russell, 1984; Wilson, Daly, & Weghorst, 1981), and such sexual exploitation is a potent source of marital conflict. So although it may well be the case that women with children sired by previous partners are quicker than others

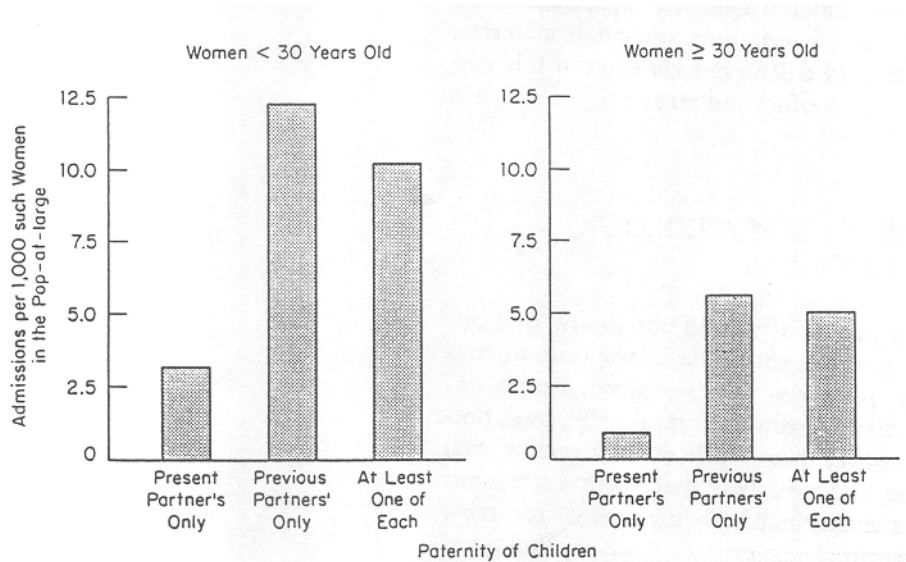


FIGURE 1.1. The per annum rates at which three groups of Canadian women seeking refuge from assaultive partners entered a women's shelter (Daly, Singh, & Wilson, 1993). Only women coresiding with a male partner and one or more own children less than 18 years of age at the time of admission are represented here, and the three groups are distinguished on the basis of their children's paternity. Data for women below versus above the median age of the shelter clients are portrayed separately.

Daly, M. & Wilson, M. (1996). Evolutionary Psychology and Marital Conflict: The Relevance of Stepchildren. In D.M. Buss & N. Malamuth (Eds.), *Sex, power, conflict: feminist and evolutionary perspectives*. New York: Oxford University Press, pp 9-28.

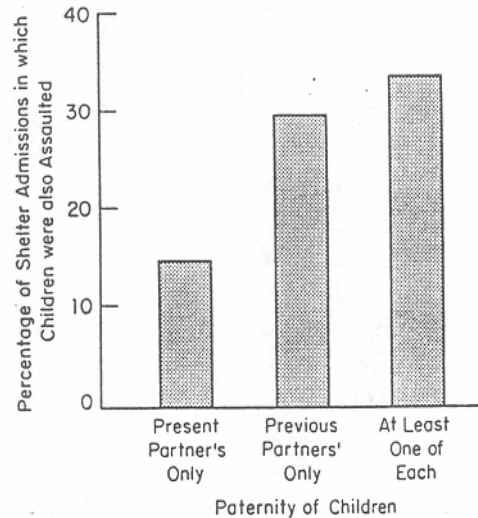


FIGURE 1.2. The percentages of women seeking refuge from assaultive partners at a Canadian women's shelter who reported that their partners had assaulted the children, as well as themselves, in relation to the children's paternity. Data from Daly, Singh, & Wilson (1993).

to make use of shelter services, flight to the women's refuge can be seen as one of several tactics of maternal defense of the children against stepparental abuse (cf. Wilson & Daly, 1992b). Homicide case descriptions and other materials show that the genetic mother's inclination to defend her children in this and other ways is itself a source of overt marital conflict and an elicitor of violence against her.

IS THERE REALLY AN EVOLVED PSYCHOLOGY OF STEPPARENTHOOD?

Just because the psyche has evolved by selection, it need not follow that our arguments are correct. Discriminative parental solicitude in response to cues of genetic versus steprelationship may or may not have evolved. People do, after all, enter into stepparental and other substitute parental roles, and, notwithstanding the problems reviewed above, these work out reasonably well more often than not. An evolutionist might suggest that, contrary to our arguments above, stepparenthood has simply not been the sort of recurring adaptive problem that would have inspired the evolution of psychological defenses against it. Nonnutritive saccharine, an evolutionarily unforeseen component of novel environments, activates our evolved system for the recognition of nutritive sugars. Might stepparenthood constitute a sort of "social saccharine," a novel social environment in which the evolved psychology of parenthood is activated maladaptively?

Such a hypothesis appears to gain plausibility when one turns to the social

scientific literature on stepparent relationships. Cherlin (1978) proposed that stepparenthood is a novel role or status with ground rules yet to be established, and that difficulties attend stepparent relationships because of this “incomplete institutionalization” and attendant “role ambiguity.” Many family sociologists have embraced and elaborated on this sort of interpretation, which is in effect a novel social environments argument, albeit a non-Darwinian one. Unfortunately, it is also a naive argument. Evolutionists, recognizing the different functions that different relationships serve for the individuals involved, have long been concerned to characterize the qualitatively distinct criteria defining an ideal mate (for example) versus an ideal daughter versus an ideal same-sex friend. However, mainstream social scientists have only recently recognized that different social relationships vary even quantitatively (e.g., in their degree of “intimacy”), and have yet to make the characterization of the essential distinguishing features of, say, peer versus mating versus filial versus sibling relationships and their respective psychologies a part of their analytic agenda. Thus, one implicit premise of Cherlin's “novel social role” argument is that social influences and expectations affect all roles and relationships in qualitatively similar ways. Reconciling this premise with elementary principles of social evolution would be difficult, if not impossible, but the social scientists who adhere to it have not yet perceived the problems facing their domain-general conception of sociality, let alone confronted them.

Of course, the fact that Cherlin's (1978) novel social role argument is uninformed by Darwinism does not mean that it must be wrong. Even on its own terms, however, this popular analysis is ahistorical, ethnocentric, and counterfactual. Stepparent relationships are not new. The mortality levels incurred by tribal hunter-gatherers guarantee that remarriage and stepparenthood have been common for as long as people have formed biparental, marital bonds; moreover, the ethnographies of recent and contemporary hunter-gatherers abound with anecdotal information on both the prevalence of stepparent relationships and their predictable conflicts (e.g., Hill & Kaplan, 1988). Nor is it correct to claim even that stepparent relationships are newly prevalent in “our society.” Historical records indicate that stepparental relationships, consequent on both widowhood and divorce, have been numerous for centuries in the Western world (e.g., Dupâquier, Hélin, Laslett, Livi-Bacci, & Seguer, 1981). Moreover, European historical archives show that having a stepparent was associated with mortality risk in fact and not just in fairy tale (Volland, 1988).

Attempts to account for stepfamily conflict in terms of the peculiarities of rapid social change in the contemporary West (or, more commonly, in terms of the peculiarities of the United States) are superfluous. All available evidence suggests that stepparent relationships are more conflictual than the corresponding genetic relationships in *all* societies, regardless of whether stepparent relationships are rare or common and regardless of their degree of institutionalization. The social saccharine hypothesis is without foundation.

But, if parasitism by stepchildren has been a chronic, significant threat to fitness, why doesn't human parental psychology reject them more consistently? Why, in other words, do people treat their stepchildren for the most part quite

tolerantly and even make costly investments in their welfare? We suggest that the answer resides in the fact that a stepparent assumes pseudoparental obligations in the context of a complex array of costs and benefits, reciprocities and negotiations. If having dependent children of former unions decreases one's value on the marriage market (as it apparently does; see Wilson & Daly, 1987), then such children constitute a cost or deterrent to remarriage for the prospective stepparent. All parties are likely to recognize more or less explicitly that stepparental tolerance and investment constitute benefits bestowed on the genetic parent and the child, entitling the stepparent to a better bargain than the stepparents mate value would otherwise warrant, whether in the form of a better quality of mate or of behavioral reciprocities. The genetic parent is likely to be grateful for stepparental investment, whereas comparable investment from a spouse who is the child's genetic parent would be considered only one's due. The interesting questions then are not why parental affection and action can ever be directed toward manifestly unrelated children, but whether the motives and emotions of stepparents vis-à-vis the children ordinarily (or indeed ever) become essentially like those of genetic parents and, if not, how they differ.

An obvious hypothesis from a Darwinian view of parental motives is that stepparental feelings will indeed differ from those of genetic parents, at least quantitatively and perhaps qualitatively, too. Indulgence toward stepchildren may be a good way to promote domestic solidarity and tranquility, but the circumstances must always have been rare in which a stepchild's welfare was as valuable to the adults expected fitness as a genetic child's welfare would be. By this argument, one should not necessarily expect to see ubiquitous abuse of stepchildren, but one would not expect to see stepparents sacrificing as much for them as genetic parents either. So, is there in fact a large difference between genetic parents and stepparents in willingness to incur major costs (e.g., life-threatening risks) on the children's behalf? We expect that there is, but we know of no relevant research. There is, however, plenty of evidence that stepparents and stepchildren alike view their relationships as less loving and as a less dependable source of material and emotional support than genetic parent-offspring relationships (e.g., Duberman, 1975; Ferri, 1984; Flinn, 1988; Perkins & Kahan, 1979; Santrock & Sitterle, 1987).

WHY SHOULD SOCIAL SCIENTISTS LEARN TO THINK EVOLUTIONARILY?

One answer to this question is in the findings. Living with a stepparent has turned out to be the most powerful predictor of severe child abuse risk yet discovered, but two decades of intensive child abuse research conducted without the heuristic assistance of Darwinian insights never discovered it. Likewise, the intensive epidemiological search for risk markers for violence against wives overlooked the same factor until evolutionary thinking led us to look.

The human psyche—the species-characteristic bundle of mind/brain mech-

anisms that produces human behavior—has evolved by selection. That is not controversial. Whether thinking evolutionarily will prove to be useful for generating sound psychological hypotheses relevant to topics such as violence against wives is, however, a genuine issue; obviously, we think it already has been useful and will continue to be. But even if willing to grant that evolutionary sophistication is a valuable aid to psychological science, social scientists may question whether psychological reductionism is an appropriate approach to the questions that interest them. We would argue (with Tooby & Cosmides, 1992) that sociological, economic, and political hypotheses are necessarily built on implicit psychological hypotheses about how individual human actors perceive and are affected by social, economic, and political variables, and that social scientific theories can be better developed and tested if they make their implicit assumptions about psychology explicit.

An impediment to evolutionary sophistication within psychology itself has been a suspicion of purposive concepts that explain action in terms of its ends. Hard sciences have supposedly progressed by shedding this sort of “teleological” thinking and adhering to a mechanistic causality. From this perspective, Darwin's discovery of natural selection was an orthodox event in the advance of scientific understanding for it replaced a supernatural purposive creator with a blind mechanism. What many psychologists have yet to grasp, however, is that the mechanistic process of selection resolves psychology's perennial confusion about how to deal with the manifest fact that living things have complex “purpose” instantiated in their structures, thus rendering doctrinaire antagonism to purposive concepts obsolete (Daly & Wilson, 1995). Darwin's theory made seemingly teleological reasoning scientific by showing that the consequences of biological phenomena constitute an essential part of their explanation: what they achieve is in a specific, concrete sense why they exist. Why an organ or a process or a preference exists or takes the form it does is just as legitimate a scientific question as how it works, and answers of the form “in order to . . .” are legitimate scientific answers. Wings are meaningfully hypothesized to exist for flying, livers to exist for detoxification, a “sweet tooth” to exist for promoting the ingestion of nutritive sugars, male sexual jealousy to exist for paternity assurance, and so forth.

Unfortunately, psychologists and social scientists have not always understood this implication of Darwinism. A common confusion is to imagine that the purposive functionality of evolutionary biology is isomorphic with an account of goals and drives. In other words, evolutionists are misunderstood to claim that fitness itself is what people and other animals strive for. In actuality, fitness consequences are properly invoked not as direct objectives or motivators, but as explanations of why certain proximal objectives and motivators have evolved to play their particular roles in the causal control of behavior. Selection designs organisms to cope with particular adaptive problems that have been sufficiently persistent across generations, both in their essential forms and in their significance, to have favored particular solutions. These evolved solutions necessarily entail contingent responsiveness to environmental features that were statistical predictors of the average fitness conse-

quences of alternative courses of action in the past. Adaptation is not prospective; adaptive performance in contemporary environments depends on the persistence of essential features of past environments.

Also impeding an infusion of evolutionary sophistication among social scientists is the false dichotomy of “social” versus “biological” explanations. Subscribers to this dichotomy equate biology with its mechanistic subdisciplines such as genetics and endocrinology and think of biological influences as intrinsic and irremediable, to be contrasted with extrinsic and remediable social influences. Moreover, since putative biological influences are invariant and constraining, those who propose their existence (the so-called nature crowd) are unmasked as pessimists and reactionaries, while the advocates of “alternative” social influences (the so-called nurture crowd) are optimists and progressives. This ideology, predicated on a profound incomprehension of evolutionary biology, pervades the social sciences, in which it is often accepted by nature advocates as thoroughly and thoughtlessly as by their nurture foes. A presumption of this prevalent worldview is that biology (falsely defined as the study of the invariant innate) is mute about aspects of sociality and behavior manifesting developmentally, experientially, and circumstantially contingent variations. The very demonstration of any such contingency is seen as an exercise in the alternative, antibiological mode of explanation. The irony is that developmentally, experientially, and circumstantially contingent variation is precisely what evolutionary biological theories of social phenomena are about.

The above misunderstandings are particularly prevalent and destructive with respect to sex and gender. Mistakenly imagining that evolutionary biology is somehow more deterministic than, say, sociology and is therefore somehow reactionary, countless writers have deplored the supposed sexism of sociobiology, without troubling to attain a first-undergraduate-course level of familiarity with the relevant theories and research. (Ironically, the field's fundamental theories about sex—see Charnov, 1982—cannot be made to lend even superficial support to the notion that one sex is superior to the other. They can much more readily be taken to imply the ineluctably equal value of females and males, although the value in question is arguably incommensurate with moral worth in any case.)

As for feminism, evolutionary biology is of direct relevance to its central conceptual and practical concerns (Gowaty, 1992). Feminism has confronted the fact that women and men are different. Thinking selectionally can help us see how and why they differ. Feminism has confronted the fact that men are motivated to limit women's autonomy. Thinking selectionally can help elucidate when and where this is especially problematic. Feminism has confronted the fact that sisterhood is not always powerful. Thinking selectionally can provide insight into the factors that facilitate and interfere with female solidarity. Darwinism has revealed some fundamental things about the male-female phenomenon, and it has the conceptual tools to direct the discovery of much more. Those interested in matters of gender—and who is not?—scorn the theory of evolution by selection to their own disadvantage.

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