

Special Section Commentary

JEALOUSY AND RATIONAL RESPONSES TO INFIDELITY
ACROSS GENDER AND CULTURE

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Buunk, Angleitner, Oubaid and Buss (this issue) offer even more evidence for our contention that responses to infidelity are based on a rational interpretation of the available evidence. They find that in cultures with less strict sanctions against extramarital sex than in the United States, people are relatively less troubled by sexual infidelity compared with emotional infidelity. The evolutionary argument proposed by Buunk et al. and by Buss, Larsen, Westen, and Semmelroth (1992) provides no ready explanation for this finding, but the rational argument does. People who think that sex can occur without love should be less troubled by sexual infidelity than people who think sex implies love because sexual infidelity does not imply to them that emotional infidelity has occurred as well. We have suggested that this "two-for-one" reasoning can explain the difference between men and women (and DeSteno & Salovey, this issue, suggest that this "double shot" can explain variability within the genders). The new evidence from Germany and the Netherlands suggests that this reasoning might explain the difference between the cultures equally well. If the Dutch indeed do think that a sexual indiscretion is less likely to be accompanied by emotional infidelity than Americans do, they should be less troubled by it. Of course, it would be nice to see the same questions that we used on Americans asked also of Dutch and German subjects, but there is reason to suspect the results would support the two-for-one hypothesis.

Another piece of evidence that argues against the evolutionary position is the repeated finding that most men do not, as the theory predicts, find sexual infidelity more troubling than emotional infidelity. According to Buss and his colleagues, men have a specific innate mechanism for sexual jealousy that, in the ancestral past, developed as a means of reducing cuckoldry; emotional infidelity should be less bothersome to men because it had far fewer consequences for their inclusive fitness. However, the data do not support this view. At best, American men are equally divided on which form of infidelity is more distressing. The data from Germany and the Netherlands are even more problematic for the theory: The majority of men found emotional infidelity more distressing. For example, on one question, approximately 75% of Dutch men found emotional infidelity more distressing than sexual infidelity. (Similar results are reported in an earlier study of mainland Chinese; Geary, Rumsey, Bow-Thomas, & Hoard, 1995.) If avoidance of cuckoldry led to males developing a specific mechanism for sexual jealousy, why are the majority of men reporting greater distress over emotional infidelity?

In the original article, Buss et al. (1992) suggested that although men have evolved to care about sexual infidelity, they

may be bothered by evidence of emotional infidelity because it signals that sex may be occurring as well. However, based on their theory, even if emotional infidelity guarantees sexual infidelity, it should not be more troubling than direct evidence of sexual infidelity. It is true that of the people who were more bothered by sexual than emotional infidelity, more were men than were women. However, the majority of both genders were more disturbed by emotional infidelity. Although the evolutionary theory can explain why emotional infidelity is bothersome to women (because it was a reliable indicator of loss of male resources in human evolutionary history), it cannot explain why, to many men, emotional infidelity is more bothersome than sexual infidelity.

Instead of proposing specific innate mechanisms, we suggest that both men and women are bothered by both forms of infidelity just as they are bothered by any evidence of a threat to something they value—be it their car, their home, or their mate. Indeed, research using continuous measures to assess intensity of jealousy supports the notion that both genders care about both types of infidelity (DeSteno & Salovey, this issue). Buunk et al. cite evidence of this type but do not discuss the problems that it raises for their hypothesis. The alternate hypothesis that needs to be treated seriously is that the gender effect evident in a forced-choice paradigm is not the product of some innate specific mechanism, but instead the result of rationality combined with the general desire people have to keep what is theirs. Work by Wiederman and Allgeier (1993) is also consistent with our theory: The more inference required by a question about jealousy, the greater the gender differences in the responses. We suggest this pattern may be due to men and women making different assumptions in such cases.

In a recent broad theoretical article, Buss (1995) argued against general psychological mechanisms in favor of a large number of specific ones, each explicable in evolutionary terms. However, humans do have one enormous general adaptive mechanism: the power for rational thought. Much of what people do is not a result of leftover modules from the savannah, but instead a reasonable response to evidence, a point that is often overlooked in nature-nurture debates. Rational beings confronting the same situation will tend to respond in similar ways. Because humans have fairly stable drives (food, shelter, mates, etc.), they are often confronted with the same situations across cultures and centuries. It is a mistake, therefore, to assume automatically that cross-cultural stability implies specific evolved mechanisms. In our view, similar patterns of jealousy in the Netherlands, Germany, and the United States provide no more evidence for specific evolved mechanisms than the finding that males from these countries micturate standing, and women sitting, would provide evidence for a specific innate preference for particular postures. The biology and basic motivation have been shaped by evolution, with many behaviors arising as a

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rational consequence of these constraints. Rational responses to biological constraints may often supply a compelling alternate explanation to proposed specific mechanisms for complex social behaviors. Women bear the greater burden of reproduction because of differences that are biological, and presumably shaped by evolution. These differences are true in all cultures. It is also true that people know about these differences, and can understand their consequences. As a result, one would expect to find great cross-cultural consistency in gender differences in mating behavior (Harris & Pashler, 1995).

Although Buss and his colleagues take cross-cultural consistency as evidence for their approach, they nonetheless acknowledge that their data also demonstrate cultural differences. In accounting for these differences, they propose that the evolved specific mechanisms for jealousy are responsive to culture and modifiable by experience. At some point, these putative biological mechanisms that can respond to ontogenetic experience, cultural values, and contingencies become the human mind and cease to be innate evolutionary holdovers in any meaningful sense. Buunk et al. discuss several possible explanations for the cross-cultural differences found, such as women in some cultures being more economically self-reliant and therefore feeling less jealousy over a partner's emotional involvement with another woman. In essence, to explain cultural differences, Buunk et al. invoke a general psychological mechanism—human reasoning. If reason is needed to account for some of the data, one has to wonder if specific mechanisms are needed to account for any of the data.

Elsewhere, in arguing for the necessity of evolutionary psychology, Buss (1995) presented a syllogism: "Because all behavior depends on complex psychological mechanisms, and all psychological mechanisms, at some basic level of description, are the result of evolution by selection, then all psychological theories are implicitly evolutionary psychological theories" (p. 2). The problem with this logic can be demonstrated by replacing the references to evolution with references to neurotransmitters, or the behavior of subatomic particles. So we are all particle physicists, too. Although in some sense all behavior is due to prior evolutionary pressures, not all types of behavior are necessarily amenable to an adaptationist interpretation. Our

objective as scientists is to provide a useful explanation for the phenomena we study, which can be done at many levels of analysis. For some phenomena, it may be most productive to study neurotransmitters; for others, analysis at the cognitive or even cultural level may provide more insight.

This is not to say that considering evolution is useless for psychologists. Basic drives and emotions influence a great deal of human behavior, and understanding them can only be progress. As Symons (1987) and Tooby and Cosmides (1989) pointed out, what is at issue is not evolution but rather whether the psychological variable under investigation can be best explained by domain-specific mechanisms or by more general psychological mechanisms. The parsimony and generality of the explanation, then, is the measure of its value. Specific mechanisms should not be invoked where more general ones will do. Evolutionary psychology's power—like that of any good theory—must lie in its ability to explain varied phenomena in terms of a small set of principles. Leaving the power for rational thought out of that set is a mistake, because in the case of gender differences in jealousy, the evidence favors the domain-general mechanism of rational thought rather than the specific mechanisms proposed by Buss and his colleagues.

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