Extramarital Sexuality, Monogamy, and Mate Poaching: Evolutionary and Societal Forces that Define Sexual Behaviors and Roles for Men and Women

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Extramarital Sexuality, Monogamy, and Mate Poaching: Evolutionary and Societal Forces that Define Sexual Behaviors and Roles for Men and Women

Abstract
Through the discussion of prevalence of extramarital sexuality (EMS), jealousy, domestic violence, monogamy, marriage, evolutionary theories, and mate poaching, a theme emerges as human sexuality finds a medium between social and cultural constructs and evolutionary constructs within the context of male and female differences. It is suggested that mate poaching has transpired due to monogamy and marriage being the defining factors of human sexual relations where needs are not being met. Also, there exists several significantly diverse sexual roles and behaviors between males and females. Men are more interested in sexual novelty and variety, whereas women are more interested in long-term relationships as assurance of a resource supply for offspring.

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Abstract

Through the discussion of prevalence of extramarital sexuality (EMS), jealousy, domestic violence, monogamy, marriage, evolutionary theories, and mate poaching, a theme emerges as human sexuality finds a medium between social and cultural constructs and evolutionary constructs within the context of male and female differences. It is suggested that mate poaching has transpired due to monogamy and marriage being the defining factors of human sexual relations where needs are not being met. Also, there exists several significantly diverse sexual roles and behaviors between males and females. Men are more interested in sexual novelty and variety, whereas women are more interested in long-term relationships as assurance of a resource supply for offspring.

Introduction

Extramarital sexuality is generally regarded as involving sexual activity with a person outside of an established relationship. It is important to discuss theories, rates, and concepts of extramarital sexuality because it can help to identify models of human behavior and human sexuality. Marriage and monogamy are social constructs that have been created that seem to defy notions of evolution and the purpose of human sexuality. Evolutionary theories and mate poaching, defined as actively luring people out of already established relationships, work to undermine marriages and monogamy in an attempt to return to the main purpose of human sexuality as a means of procreation.

Prevalence and Types of Extramarital Sexuality

With divorce rates increasing, it is important to identify some trends that exist within the confines of marriage and extramarital sexuality. In terms of prevalence of extramarital sexuality (EMS), rates seem to hover around 25% for men and 15% for women. For men, rates of EMS increase with age, whereas women show an increase in EMS between the ages of 30 and 50 (Widermann, 1997).

A study by Liu (2000) suggested that marital duration is an important factor in the prevalence of extramarital sexuality. Men showed a decrease in EMS for the first 18-20 years of a marriage, and a gradual increase in EMS after 20 years of marriage. Women showed a steady decline in EMS as the length of the marriage increased. This suggests that women are more focused on long-term mating, whereas men may devote a certain amount of time to long-term mating, but later refocus their attention towards short-term mating.

In a study by Atkins, Baucom, & Jacobsen (2001), it was found that for respondents who made over $30,000 a year, EMS had a positive correlation with income. Also, in couples who reported one spouse working out of the home and the other staying within the home, there were higher rates of EMS. By spending more time outside of the home, there was more interaction with more people. It was also be concluded that people who work outside of the home may have to travel and attend more social functions, allowing for the possibility of meeting someone with whom EMS may be performed.

People who reported being "not too happy" within their marriage were found to be four times more likely to report EMS than people who responded "very happy" (Atkins et al., 2001). This study also reported that there was a negative correlation with the age at which a person was married and EMS. This would make sense since someone who was married at the age of 20 would have more time to partake in EMS than someone who was married at the age of 30. Also, people who are married younger may be more socially and emotionally immature; their relationships may be immature as well, and development may still be taking place (Atkins et al., 2001). Extramarital sexuality may be an outlet for the development of social and emotional functioning at the cost of damaging an already existing relationship.

The importance of fidelity within a marriage has significantly shifted. The toleration of infidelity has increased since the middle part of the 20th century (Larson, 1988). One study showed that there was a drastic decrease in the role of fidelity as central to a marriage (1988).
Longitudinal research conducted during the latter half of the 20th century showed a significant decline in fidelity being a large part of the foundation of an intimate relationship or marriage (1988).

In order to understand EMS, it is important to distinguish and define the different forms. Lawson (1988) proposes three types of EMS: parallel, traditional, and recreational. These are meant to be a general guide for identifying types of EMS and what implications may be imminent for the future of a relationship. The information required in order to create these definitions was compiled from many qualitative and quantitative studies, including many personal interviews.

Parallel adultery involves a mistress or a concubine (Lawson, 1988). This type of EMS seems to be more conducive to evolutionary perspectives, since it can involve one man and several women. The idea of a “kept” woman seems more appealing to men (1988). In this type of EMS, the wife may choose to ignore it, rather than protest. However, this may actually appeal to wives since they can be more “adventurous” and be more independent while being supported by her husband (Lawson, 1988). The man may be getting his sexual fulfillment from another woman, leaving the wife to enjoy a supported lifestyle without being obligated to have sex with her husband.

Traditional adultery defines EMS as being a direct breach of a marriage. In the traditional sense, the man’s role within a marriage involves power; he is the protector and provider. Within a marriage, the woman supplies nurturance and care. Traditional adultery is often regarded as the most dangerous and detrimental form of adultery since it is so secretive, both for men and women. However, within the traditional type of EMS, women may be granted more power since their role may not consist of nurturance and care, but may be the direct result of hedonism or seeking pleasure (Lawson, 1988).

Recreational adultery satisfies the desire to play and the need for novelty and variety within a marriage. This type of adultery is based on the direct pursuit of pleasure, without worry of morals. Hedonism is engaged by both members of an intimate relationship. Recreational forms of EMS are, generally, not as detrimental as the other two forms. Recreational adultery usually involves gang-bangs, threesomes, and swinging (Lawson, 1988).

**Monogamy and Marriage**

Marriage is essentially defined as being monogamous. A man is faithful to his wife and vice-versa. Monogamy demands exclusivity (Barash & Lipton, 2001). Extramarital sexuality occurs because of the social creation of marriage in which there is supposed to be one male for every female. For males, the idea of monogamy suggests monotony (2001). Using EMS prevalence information from Widermann (1997), Liu (2000), and Atkins, Baucom, & Jacobsen (2001), it seems as though males crave novelty and variety, and marriage is the direct opposite of those needs.

Within monogamy, two types of love can be identified: masculine and feminine (Lawson, 1988). These two types of love may be largely socially created, but are relatively descriptive of the roles men and women play within a marriage. Masculine love, also referred to as instrumental love, is characterized by supplying resources like money, food, and shelter, which is related to a general theme of looking after the family. Feminine styles of love are portrayed as actively expressing feelings of love that provide essential elements of intimacy and comfort (1988).

The construct of monogamy relies heavily on the idea of egalitarianism (Barash & Lipton, 2001). When one partner commits an act of EMS, it causes an imbalance in the relationship. Egalitarianism, which is essential to marriage and any intimate relationship, is partially destroyed through cheating behavior (2001). When this imbalance occurs, it is also important to identify jealousy and the effect it may have on the future of a relationship.

**Jealousy and Domestic Violence within Extramarital Sexuality**

Duncombe, Harrison, Allan, & Marsden (2004) define jealousy as the most common and universal response to EMS. They found elevated levels of jealousy in situations where there was EMS within a relationship. More importantly, they found correlations between jealousy and the mere thought that a spouse was committing EMS (2004). Feelings of jealousy can be evoked even when EMS is non-existent.

Results obtained by Duncombe et al. (2004)
suggested that men seem to be driven to cheat through thoughts of novelty and an increased sex drive that is not matched by their partner. Once again, the idea of monogamy suggests monotony (Barash & Lipton, 2001). Men become bored with their partners and use EMS as an outlet for their boredom. Unfortunately, EMS can strain the already unstable relationship as males try to cope with their desires to be with different women.

Contrary to men, women engage in EMS when they are in a state of dissatisfaction with their relationship (Duncombe et al., 2004). Men seem to cheat because of purely sexual reasons, whereas women cheat due to more emotional reasons. Duncombe et al. (2004) also suggested that couples who shared the same levels of commitment and compromise would exhibit lower levels of EMS. The true egalitarianism of a relationship can be used as an indicator for future fidelity (2004). This implication is important for researchers that are trying to discover themes of EMS and trying to understand how to design therapy for couples or individuals dealing with EMS.

Duncombe et al. (2004) suggested an emerging double standard as related to jealousy, with a focus on men as being the main perpetrators of EMS. It is much more forgivable when a man engages in EMS. In a wide variety of cultures, male jealousy is more likely to lead to a murder, an attempted murder, or domestic abuse than female jealousy. However, the literature still indicates that females are more jealous than men in regards to EMS (2004). Violence may be a more common response in males, whereas females are driven by their increased dependency (2004). Using social marriage and love scripts, as defined by Lawson (1988), women must seek to maintain a level of comfort and expressive love, while men are shamed by the EMS behaviors exhibited by their wives. It is the male’s job within a marriage to provide and protect the family; EMS committed by the wife shows that he is not providing for the family sufficiently.

In a study that investigated the connection between domestic violence, male honor, and female fidelity, Vandello & Cohen (2003) identified cultures in which social customs, and even law, allow violence against women in response to infidelity. Three hypotheses were tested in the study: in honor cultures, (1) female fidelity will cause greater damage to a male’s reputation, (2) the man’s reputation can be partially restored through the use of violence, and (3) women are expected to stay loyal in violent situations (2003). Honor cultures include Mediterranean societies, Middle Eastern cultures, Latin and South American cultures, and the American South. Men in these societies are expected to be tough and able to protect their families from harm.

There are also norms dictated for females in which they are expected to be modest, shameful, and avoidant of behaviors that could damage the family name (2003). Females are given power through a very patriarchal and collectivistic society. It is important to understand that in honor cultures, most social and economic interactions are dependent on family reputation. Honor is used as a justification for domestic violence; it serves as a safety net to ensure the integrity and well-being of a family (2003).

The study focused on attitudes in the Northern United States and Southern United States, as well as in Latin America, toward infidelity, honor, and the use of domestic violence. In Latin American and Southern American cultures, it is generally accepted that women are virgins until they are married, faithful when they are wives, and chaste when widowed (2003).

Vandello & Cohen’s study consisted of two parts; in the first part, over 600 Brazilian and U.S. college students participated (2003). There is a popular Brazilian saying, “wash the honor with the blood” (2003), which implies justification for the use of violence in a situation where family honor is at risk. Students were supplied with scenarios in which a partner was faithful or unfaithful. Participants then rated each partner’s characteristics and traits. In one scenario, a woman was unfaithful to her husband. The Brazilian students rated the man as being less trustworthy if the wife was unfaithful. Students from the U.S. did not view the man as being less trustworthy.

In the second scenario of the first part of this study, students were presented with a situation in which a man responds with violence to infidelity. More specifically, when the man found out about his wife’s behavior, he elicited one of four responses: (1) yelling at her, (2) using physical violence, (3) doing nothing, and (4) asking for a divorce (Vandello & Cohen, 2003). In the case of
the male using physical violence, the students were asked to rate masculinity. American students rated the male as being less masculine, while the Brazilians rated the male as being more masculine. Brazilians saw violence as more justified, however, violence was never fully approved in either culture.

In the second part of the study, students at a Northern American university were involved in a confederate based situation. Northern and Southern Americans, as well as Hispanics, were all involved in this study. Participants showed up for a study to find that the researcher would be late. Shortly thereafter, a woman showed up as the second participant with her fiancé (both were confederates). Eventually, an argument would start between the two confederates over the woman wanting to stop at her ex-boyfriend's house after the study. The male would become angry and end up pushing the woman into the wall and taking her keys. The male would then leave and the female would sit back down in the waiting room. The confederate would initiate conversation by either justifying or showing a no-tolerance attitude toward her fiancé. Participant response was observed and recorded and later coded. Southern American and Hispanic students were more likely to voice tolerance. They were also more likely to have a positive reaction to the confederate who showed self-blaming tendencies, while the Northern American students had a more positive reaction to the no-tolerance confederate. Hispanics and Southern Americans even rated the woman who wanted to leave her fiancé as being colder and less morally just than the woman who wanted to stay (Vandello & Cohen, 2003).

It was concluded that men who lose honor through their wife's infidelity can partially redeem it by using violence (Vandello & Cohen, 2003). Females are expected to remain loyal when faced with aggressive acts. Infidelity and domestic violence can be the cause of an abusive male, but it is important to understand the ways in which a society or culture reinforce and sanction responses to extramarital sexuality.

**Evolution and Human Sexuality**

Understanding the role of evolution within the context of human sexuality can help to explain common themes of EMS. By viewing sex as a natural instinct ending in pregnancy and procreation, men have the option of investment, whereas women do not (Duncombe, Harrison, Allan, & Marsden, 2004). Viewed in its most basic biological terms, once women become pregnant, they do not have the choice of investment; women are bound, for nine months, while their children develop. The male’s role in pregnancy is completed when the sexual act of ejaculation has been performed (2004).

From an evolutionary perspective, sperm is cheap, and eggs are expensive (Duncombe, Harrison, Allan, & Marsden, 2004). Females are required to invest much more time and energy into the childbearing process. Again, parental investment is only an option to the male. In terms of gamete value, in the time it takes a woman to create one egg, a man will produce over a billion sperm (Barash & Lipton, 2001). Due to these relatively cheap and easily replaceable gametes, the male reproductive benefit increases as the number of sexual partners increases. The metabolic and energy costs remain low for males throughout the reproductive process (2001).

The sexual strategies theory (SST) is an evolutionary theory that helps to define sex roles for males and females. Under the SST, differences are established in the reproductive constraints of men and women (Schmitt & Buss, 1993). There are also differences in short- and long-term mating strategies exhibited by the two sexes that tend to match with parental investment and the nature of gametes (1993). Women are forced to worry about the quality of their external resources when reproducing. There are distinct psychological mechanisms within males and females, which work to solve problems arising out of different needs for reproduction (1993). Also, adaptive strategies were created for survival and to guarantee reproductive success (Eagly & Wood, 1999).

In one study, it was found that “men desire easy sexual access in short-term matings, and when women suggest easy access, they are perceived as particularly effective at short-term mate attraction” (p1200, Schmitt & Buss, 1996). Findings from this study suggest that women are in control and make the final decision when initiating sexual behavior. Also, it seems as though men are in pursuit of more short-term mating. For males, the immediate gratification of sex is desired over the female preference for a long-term mating.
experience.

Schmitt & Buss (1996) also found that in short-term mating, women who suggested sexual availability were more effective, while women who suggested fidelity and exclusivity were more effective in long-term mating. Men with different goals and desires seek out women who can adhere to those desired behaviors. Mate selection seems to be fluid and flexible. People can change their mate preference, and the implication in EMS suggests that marriage and monogamy are attempts to stop the fluctuation of mate selection criteria.

It was also concluded that derogation tactics were judged effective in attracting a short-term mate (Schmitt & Buss, 1996). In regards to short-term mating practices, dominance and status seem to signify the probability of being successful. This suggests a more instinctual and primal view of sexuality in which the main purpose of sexual intercourse is the procreation of the human species.

In another study that uses the evolutionary theory of sexual selection, as proposed by Darwin (1871) and later refined by Trivers (1972), to explain sexual behaviors exhibited by males and females, Eagly & Wood (1999) discuss how human behavior evolved through male competition and female selection. Women are a limited reproductive resource for men. Again, female gametes are relatively expensive, implying that they would benefit most by devoting less time to short-term mating and devoting more time to long-term mating (1999). Mate selection and preference are all related to and based on maximum reproductive benefit. Sexual behavior developed relative to the nature and processes associated with the human reproductive organs.

As part of evolutionary theory, the idea of selection is important to discuss in order to develop a more coherent view of human sexuality. Selection also relates to social and personality branches of psychology, in which research suggests that "individuals appear to prefer and to select mates who are similar to them with respect to the dimensions of surgency, agreeableness, conscientiousness, emotional stability, and openness" (Buss, 1987, p1219). Selection, marriage, monogamy, and evolution are constructs that are connected through several different fields of psychology. There is no single answer and no single cause of extramarital sexuality. Evolution is just one of the many branches of psychology that contribute to theories of human sexuality.

**Mate Poaching and Mate Retention Tactics**

Mate poaching is the act of seeking out mates that are already involved in romantic relationships. Schmitt (2004) investigated the prevalence and nature of mate poaching in 53 nations by developing The International Sexuality Description Project which involved over 16,000 participants.

Mate poaching seems to be a cultural universal. Also, it was established that mate poachers and their targets share similar traits of extraversion, agreeableness, openness, and erotophilia (being comfortable talking about sex) (Schmitt, 2004). The psychological characteristics of those who participate in mate poaching were different than those who participated on general romantic attraction (Schmitt & Buss, 2001). This is an important finding since it suggests that mate poaching is a completely different form of love and human sexuality altogether. As a psychologically distinct form of attraction, people who participate in mate poaching, both the poacher and poached, may not be interested or successful in establishing long-term relationships since it is in the nature of both participants to destroy already established relationships (Schmitt, 2004). Mate poaching may also be an entirely human construct since it involves actively seeking out individuals who are known to already be in relationships.

Schmitt and Buss (2004) found that mate poachers display characteristics of assertiveness combined with unempathetic tendencies. These types of people are hedonists and hold the pursuit of their own pleasure as most important. The most successful mate poachers are open to new experiences, sexually attractive, unfaithful, and erotophilic (2004). These traits suggest that people who succumb to mate poaching and who are successfully attracted away from their relationships are in pursuit of novelty and variety.

In another study, it was presumed that the most effective tactics for mate poaching involved being generous and enhancing the ego of the person being poached. (Schmitt & Shackelford, 2003) Men who offered sexual access and physical beauty were most effective, while women who...
displayed dominance and resources were most effective (2003). These findings suggest a possible role reversal as the most effective means of mate poaching. In monogamous relationships, especially marriage, it is accepted that males are dominant and acquire resources to care for a family.

It was concluded that men pursue more short-term relationships through mate poaching (Schmitt, 2004). This supports evolutionary perspectives that men desire short-term mating because of the relative cost and nature of their gametes. Another important finding which further establishes the evolutionary male preference for short-term mating is that men also succumbed to more short-term poaching attempts (2004). Not only do men show higher levels of mate poaching, but when presented with the opportunity to spread their gametes, they are more readily accepting of terminating an already established relationship. In terms of cultural trends, it was found that women report more success when mate poaching in North America, Western and Eastern Europe, and Oceania (2004).

The International Sexuality Description Project also defined environments in which mate poaching was more prevalent (Schmitt, 2004). In resource poor environments, there were more monogamous relationships. In resource rich environments, short-term mate poaching was more common (2004). It makes sense that in environments where people had to worry about basic daily living there were more monogamous relationships. People in these environments can barely take care of themselves, let alone several children. Their sexual desires may be set aside in order to carry out behaviors conducive to basic daily living. In environments where resources are abundant, the purpose of sexual activity may include procreation as well as pleasure.

When the number of females outnumbers the number of males in a particular region, the entire mating system moves towards sexual promiscuity (Schmitt, 2004). Women are no longer a limited resource, as proposed by Eagly & Wood (1999). The notion of female selection no longer exists because of the relative availability of males.

There are special costs associated with mate poaching. Also, males and females were found to exhibit mate poaching for a variety of reasons (Schmitt & Buss, 2001). Men used mate poaching as a means to achieve sexual variety, acquire beauty, and to enjoy a lack of responsibility. Women used mate poaching as a means to acquire resources, seek revenge on a rival, and to gain an already proven mate (2001). All of these reasons are consistent with evolutionary theories that define mate selection as different for males and females. However, a female in search of an already proven mate by means of mate poaching seems highly ironic. If a woman is successful in luring a male away from his established romantic relationship, how is she guaranteed that it will not happen to her? If the male is easily attracted away from his mate, mate poaching should occur relatively frequently, and there is also no assurance of prolonged resource acquisition.

As a natural response to mate poaching attempts, mate retention tactics have emerged. In a study involving over 200 married couples, 19 retention tactics were defined (Buss & Shackelford, 1997). Some of the retention tactics discussed included vigilance, concealment of mate, emotional manipulation, derogation of competitors, love and care, and violence against rivals (1997).

Men were found to guard current mates by means of making threats to both mate and rival, and by displaying resources (Buss & Shackelford, 1997). A pattern emerged that suggested that male roles involve acquiring resources and competitive behaviors. Women enhanced their own appearance and exhibited signs of partner possession as a means of mate retention (1997).

Men who were married to younger women allotted more effort to mate retention than men who were married to older women (Buss & Shackelford, 1997). This suggests that women, especially younger women, are a limited resource that men are in constant competition for. Retention acts by women were not significantly linked to the age of their mates (1997).

Conclusion

Monogamy and marriage are social and cultural constructs that have been established that are gradually being destabilized by acts like mate poaching. Evolution has helped to identify several mate selection and sexual differences between males and females. Males generally crave sexual variety and novelty, while females generally desire established long-term relationships in which
resources are provided by a male. Males also engage in higher levels of mate poaching and EMS, which is consistent with evolutionary definitions of male sexual behavior. In response to mate poaching, mate retention tactics have also emerged that are also varied in relation to gender.

References


