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Sexual Conflict in Human Mating

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Abstract
Despite interdependent reproductive fates that favor cooperation, males and females exhibit many psychological and behavioral footprints of sexually antagonistic coevolution. These include strategies of deception, sexual exploitation, and sexual infidelity as well as anti-exploitation defenses such as commitment skepticism and emotions such as sexual regret and jealousy. Sexual conflict pervades the mating arena prior to sexual consummation, after a mating relationship has formed, and in the aftermath of a breakup. It also permeates many other social relationships in forms such as daughter-guarding, conflict in opposite-sex friendships, and workplace sexual harassment. As such, sexual conflict constitutes not a narrow or occasional flashpoint but rather persistent threads that run through our intensely group-living species.

Keywords
sexual conflict, human mating, sexual exploitation, deception

Males and females typically require cooperation to reproduce successfully. The need for sustained cooperative coordination between the sexes is especially strong in species with prolonged childhood. Extended infancy and juvenility render offspring vulnerable to many "hostile forces of nature," such as starvation, predators, and hostile conspecifics. Mating cooperation protects children from life-threatening forces. From an evolutionary perspective, a child represents a mutually produced "vehicle" for both parents, forging a partially shared genetic fate. Interdependent reproductive fortunes create selection pressure for adaptations for harmonious collaboration and cooperation. Psychological adaptations for love and attachment, involving the heavy commitment of time, psychological resources, reproductive resources, and parental investment, represent hallmarks of cooperation between the sexes (Buss, 2006; Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007).

Given this cooperative context, it may seem surprising that sexual conflict pervades human mating. Indeed, sexual conflict theory has produced a radical change in thinking within the framework of modern evolutionary biology, which had previously conceived of reproduction primarily as a cooperative endeavor (Arnqvist & Rowe, 2013).

Sexual Conflict Defined

The form of sexual conflict between males and females most relevant here is *interlocus conflict*, which involves conflicts between different genes located in individual males and individual females (Chapman, 2014; Parker, 2006). They are called interlocus conflicts because they typically involve phenotypic characteristics encoded by different alleles at different loci. This class of sexual conflicts comes closest to Parker's original definition of sexual conflict: "*a conflict between the evolutionary interests of individuals of the two sexes*" (Parker, 2006, p. 235). Although there are important exceptions, sexual conflicts at the genetic level often reduce to sexual conflicts between individual males and individual females (Chapman, 2014; Shackelford & Goetz, 2012), the primary focus of this paper.

From an evolutionary perspective, sexual conflict ultimately stems from the fact that the reproductive interests of individual men and individual women diverge, sometimes dramatically. Sexual conflict is a "battleground" that creates a form of selection that has far-reaching consequences for understanding large domains of human social behavior, and mating strategies most centrally.

The most fundamental sexual conflict centers around sex itself. Because of asymmetries in obligatory parental

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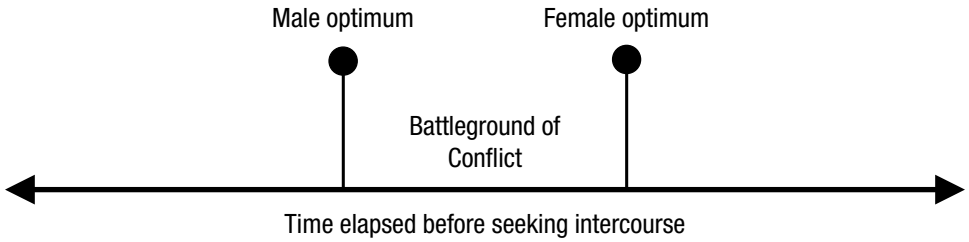

Fig. 1. An example of sexual conflict in which the optimum for time elapsed before sexual intercourse occurs differs for men and women. Recurrent zones of sexual conflict over evolutionary time select for adaptations in each sex to influence the other to be closer to each actor's optimum. Others examples include amount of investment prior to sex, frequency of sex within a relationship, and amount each invests in offspring.

investment inherent in human reproductive biology—the large female investment of nutrient-rich eggs, internal female fertilization, 9-month internal gestation, and postpartum lactation—the costs of making poor sexual decisions are typically higher for women than for men. These asymmetries create different optima for males and female surrounding many aspects of sexuality, as illustrated in Figure 1.

A longer female optimum for time elapsed before consenting to sex allows a wider window for assessing a potential mate's intentions, encumbrances, social status, resources, disease load, parasite load, relationship load, and other components of mate value (Buss, 2016; Buss, Goetz, Duntley, Asao, & Conroy-Beam, 2017). Access to the valuable reproductive assets females possess historically has been the major constraint on male reproductive success.

Sexual conflict can occur at each of three temporal phases of the mating process—prior to consummation, after a mateship has formed, and in the aftermath of a breakup.

Sexual Conflict on the Mating Market

Human mating pools typically consist of individuals who differ in mate value as well as individuals who are pursuing different mating strategies, such as short term versus long term (Buss & Schmitt, 1993). Both dimensions create opportunities for sexual conflict, starting with deception about which sexual strategy one is pursuing.

Sexual deception

Deception is a hallmark of conflict. Empirical research shows that men and women display predictable patterns of sexual deception in the form of psychological mimicry of cues to commitment and the emotions of love (Buss, 2016; Haselton, Buss, Oubaid, & Angleitner, 2005; Toma, Hancock, & Ellison, 2008).

When asked whether they had ever exaggerated the depth of their feelings for a woman in order to have sex with her, 71% of men admitted to having done so, compared with only 39% of women asked a parallel question (Buss, 2016). When asked whether they had ever discovered that they had been deceived by members of the opposite sex in this manner, parallel sex differences emerged, with more women than men reporting having been victimized by this tactic. A study that requested men and women to list all the ways in which they had been deceived by a member of the opposite sex showed similar sex differences (Haselton et al., 2005). More women than men report having been misled about the intensity or strength of a potential mate's feelings for them. Given that women look for emotional involvement as a cue to commitment when seeking a long-term mate, these findings suggest that some men deceive women about the sexual strategy they are pursuing. They feign long-term love in order to achieve short-term sexual opportunities.

Conversely, because women hold valuable reproductive resources that men strongly desire, women can deceive men about their willingness to have sex in order to secure nonsexual resources. The key to the success of this strategy is sending signals of short-term sexual interest, extracting resources, and then failing to deliver the sexual benefits implied by the signals (Buss, 2016). In reports of experiences of deception at the hands of the opposite sex, men are far more likely than women to report having been deceived in this way—25% of the men but only 4% of the women (Haselton et al., 2005).

Women and men also deceive about their mate value, mimicking qualities desired by the other gender. On Internet dating profiles, for example, women report being 15 pounds lighter than they are when their weight is measured in the laboratory (e.g., Toma & Hancock, 2010). Similarly, men exaggerate their height, rounding up by a couple of inches, as well as overstating their income. These sex-linked forms of deception correspond

to sex-differentiated mate preferences found worldwide, supporting the hypothesis that mate preferences dictate the domains of intrasexual competition in the other gender (Buss, 1989, 1996, 2016).

Antideception defenses

Emotions such as anger and upset have been hypothesized to be evolved defenses, for example by deterring or avoiding interference with one's preferred mating strategy (Buss, 1989). Women more than men, for example, should experience greater anger when psychologically deceived by a potential mate about the depth of the individual's feelings in order to achieve short-term sex. Results from two different cultures, Germany and the United States, support this prediction (Haselton et al., 2005). When asked about how upset they would be if they discovered that the man they had dated a few times and then had sex with had exaggerated the depth of his feelings in order to have sex with them, most women indicate that they would be "extremely upset," reaching ceiling on the rating scale. Men report considerably less upset about analogous deception by a woman.

If deception about sexual access is a form of sexual conflict initiated by women, selection is predicted to fashion antagonistic co-evolutionary defenses in men to guard against such deception. Men more than women report that they would experience anger and emotional upset at precisely this form of sexual deception, a finding replicated in two cultures (Haselton et al., 2005). This provides evidence for a sexually antagonistic defense against sex-linked forms of strategic interference.

Women also appear to have evolved sophisticated deception-detection defenses. They tend to be better than men at reading nonverbal facial expressions of emotion (Hall, 1990), although this ability undoubtedly has other gender-linked functions such as correctly inferring the need states of dependent offspring. Women experience lower thresholds for sexual disgust than do men (Al-Shawaf & Buss, in press), which may impose a further barrier to both low mate-value men and men's sexual deception. Women also appear to possess a specific cognitive adaptation to the problem of sexual deception, the *commitment skepticism bias* (Cyrus, Schwarz, & Hassebrauck, 2011; Haselton & Buss, 2000). When encountering easy-to-fake signals of commitment, such as verbal declarations of love or emotion, women show suspicion or dubiety, which in turn evoke more difficult-to-fake signals and function to weed out suitors solely interested in casual sex. The commitment skepticism bias has been replicated in Germany; appears specific to young, fertile women; and is absent in postmenopausal women (Cyrus et al., 2011). An example of these forms of sexually antagonistic coevolution is shown graphically in Figure 2.

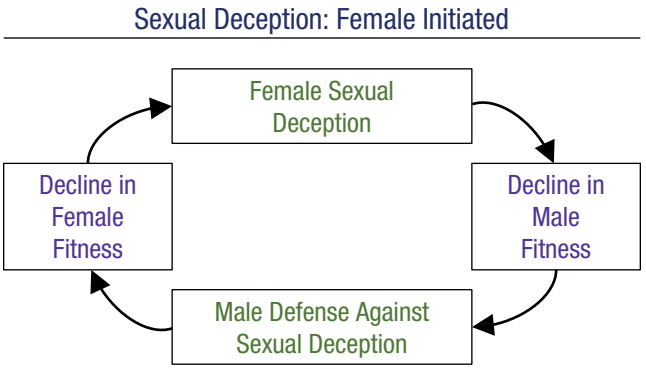

Fig. 2. An example of sexually antagonistic coevolution. In this example, female initiated deception decreases the reproductive fitness of male victims, favoring selection for male defenses to prevent becoming victims of deception, which in turn favors more refined female deceptive strategies. Other forms of sexually antagonistic coevolution occur with other forms of sexual exploitation, such as male-initiated deception and sexual coercion.

Sexual exploitation

Exploitative strategies, of which deception is merely one, are hallmarks of conflict (Buss & Duntley, 2008). Unlike other strategies, those of exploitation use coercion, force, or deception to obtain resources. Consider predators and prey. Cheetahs do not target gazelles randomly. They choose those who are exploitable due to being young, slow, hobbled, or less attentive to their surroundings. Analogously, men seeking casual sex focus on women they perceive to be sexually exploitable, discerning such cues as to persuadability, deceivability, or coercibility. Sexual exploitation involves attempting to gain sexual access by bypassing the usual filters and barriers imposed by female choice.

Using stimuli of photos of 100 women, research has identified some of these key cues (Goetz, Easton, Lewis, & Buss, 2012; Goetz, Easton, & Buss, 2014). They include indicators such as being dressed in skimpy or revealing clothing and being sleepy, intoxicated, or otherwise incapacitated. They also include less obvious exploitability cues such as being attention-seeking, oblivious to surroundings, and reckless (Goetz et al., 2012; Goetz, Easton et al., 2014). Studies coding nonverbal behavior have documented sexual exploitability cues that involve a slow walking speed and short gait, as well as the behavioral cues to shyness (e.g., Sakaguchi & Hasegawa, 2006). Importantly, men find women exhibiting sexual exploitability cues to be highly attractive as short-term mates but distinctly unattractive as long-term mates—a hypothesized design feature of men's adaptations for sexual exploitation (Goetz et al., 2012). Men dispositionally inclined toward a short-term mating strategy, more than long-term oriented men, are especially prone to viewing women as sexually exploitable (Lewis, Easton, Goetz, & Buss, 2012).

Defenses against sexual exploitation

Women sometimes turn the tables on men and exploit the would-be exploiters. Some women intentionally emit sexual exploitability cues for their own goals, which range from status enhancement to resource extraction (Goetz, Easton, & Meston, 2014). Some intentionally give off exploitability signals to lure a man into a committed mateship. The finding that men, more than women, tend to regret acts of sexual pursuit that do not result in consummation, such as investing too much effort trying to attract someone who did not consent to sex (14% of men versus 5% of women), points to a counter-counter adaptation in men to avoid this form of sexual deception in the future (Galperin et al., 2013). Exploiting would-be exploiters is but one defense against being a victim of exploitation. Another is sexual regret.

Sexual regret as a defense against sexual exploitation

Research on the emotion of regret suggests another footprint of sexual conflict. One hypothesized function of regret is to avoid recommitting costly errors in the future, motivating alternative strategies to prevent repeating past mistakes (Galperin et al., 2013). In the sexual domain, two large classes of potentially regrettable actions are acts of sexual commission (e.g., having sex while drunk) and missed sexual opportunities (e.g., failing to act on a sexual opportunity). Studies of sexual regret reveal hallmarks of sexual conflict (Galperin et al., 2013). Women, more than men, tend to regret acts of sexual commission. These include losing one's virginity to the "wrong" person (24% of women versus 10% of men), having sex with someone who faked commitment (17% versus 3%), and having sex with a stranger (20% versus 6%). Sexual regret may prevent future sexual exploitation, although this prediction remains to be tested empirically. These substantial gender differences in sexual regret have been robustly replicated in Norway, a highly sexually egalitarian culture within which psychological gender differences are sometimes presumed to be attenuated or absent, but clearly are not in this case (Kennair, Bendixen, & Buss, 2016).

In sum, sexual conflict has created sexually antagonistic arms races, with offenses in one sex designed to influence the other, creating selection pressure for defenses, counteroffences, and increasingly sophisticated defenses. The psychological and behavioral footprints of sexually antagonistic arms races occur not just on the mating market. They continue, albeit over different battlegrounds, after a mateship has formed.

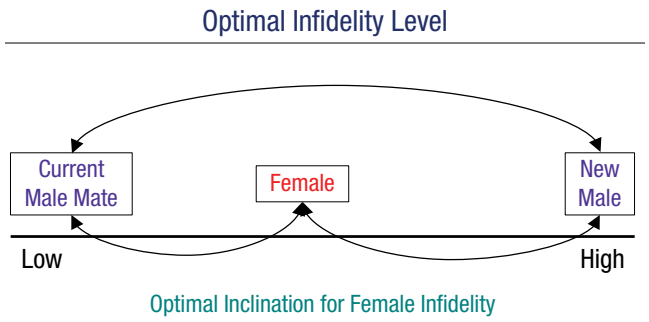

Fig. 3. An example of triadic sexually antagonistic coevolution. In this example, the optimum inclination for a particular woman to have sex with someone outside of her long-term mateship differs for her, for her regular male partner, and for the new potential male (mate poacher). Recurrent triadic sexual conflicts of this sort create adaptations in each player to influence the other two players to be closer to his or her optimum.

Sexual Conflict Within Relationships: Infidelity and Jealousy

Long-term mating is a key mating strategy of humans, unlike most other mammals (Buss & Schmitt, 1993). It usually entails an explicit or implicit social contract regarding exclusive allocation of sexual and emotional resources to a partner. Sexual infidelity violates that contract, providing a prime example of sexual conflict. Although estimates vary from study to study, roughly 20% to 50% of American married individuals appear to engage in sexual infidelity at some point (Buss, 2016). Hypotheses about the functions of infidelity vary and include securing additional reproductive opportunities, obtaining superior genes to be transmitted to one's children, gaining access to additional economic resources, getting rid of a cost-inflicting mate, and acquiring and transitioning to an alternative mate (Buss et al., 2017). When we add strategies of mate poaching to the mix, this creates triadic sexually antagonistic conflict in which the optimum of each of the three participants differs, as shown in Figure 3.

If the adaptive optimum for a married man is to keep his partner 100% sexually faithful and the optimum for a mate poacher is to lure her away for a sexual liaison or more permanent mateship, the optimum for the women might be somewhere in between. Evidence supports the hypothesis that women sometimes use infidelity strategically to cultivate a backup mate, to test the mating waters to determine her mate value, to get rid of a cost-inflicting mate, or transition back into the mating market (Buss et al., 2017).

Infidelity, whether of sexual or emotional resources, disrupts shared fate and interdependent reproductive fortunes. It diverts previously pooled reproductive resources to individuals external to the couple (Conroy-Beam, Goetz, & Buss, 2015). This is likely the reason

why infidelity is one of the strongest and most commonly cited causes of conjugal dissolution across cultures (Betzig, 1989). Conflict over the allocation of sexual and other reproductively relevant resources creates a key battleground within couple relationships, forging selection pressures for defenses that influence the other member of the couple to be closer to the actor's optimum.

Defenses against a partner's infidelity include tactics of mate guarding, from vigilance to violence, as well as the emotion of jealousy (Buss, 2016). Design features of the emotion of sexual jealousy support the hypothesis that it is a sexual conflict adaptation designed to combat the diversion of reproductively relevant resources to individuals external to the couple (Buss & Abrams, 2017). These include gender differences in (1) relative sensitivities to sexual and emotional forms of infidelity, (2) characteristics of rivals such as job prospects and physical attractiveness, (3) likelihood of forgiveness versus breakup contingent on the form of infidelity, and (4) intensity of mate guarding contingent on mate qualities such as physical attractiveness and income.

Further evidence for infidelity and jealousy being footprints of sexual conflict include their strong links to intimate partner violence (Buss & Duntley, 2011) and stalking in the aftermath of a romantic breakup (Duntley & Buss, 2012).

Sexual Conflict in the Aftermath of a Breakup

Sexual conflict does not always end with the termination of the mating relationship. Rejected mates sometimes attempt to entice their former mate back into the relationship and interfere with the former mate's attempts to re-mate. In the extreme, this takes the form of stalking (Duntley & Buss, 2012). Although currently illegal in most Western cultures, stalking appears to have a functional logic. It works by driving off others who attempt to mate with their former partner. Simultaneously, it interferes with the former mate's attempts to form a new mating relationship. As one woman in our studies described it, *"I broke up with him and he couldn't handle it. He felt like he owned me or controlled me. When I made decisions such as this, he would just snap. I could not date anyone because he would get so mad and he would try to fight that other guy."* After 6 months, she got back together with her ex because she said he had repelled all other men, preventing her from re-mating (Duntley & Buss, 2012).

Obviously, stalking in the aftermath of a breakup inflicts costs on the former partner and on new potential mates who generally prefer to avoid incurring the costs of courting someone being stalked by a potentially dangerous former partner. Stalking often fails, and in the modern environment, there exist laws, police, and a judicial system designed to punish stalkers. But these laws are routinely broken, stalkers often evade punishment, and stalking sometimes works. For the present purposes, the functions of stalking illustrate the proposition that sexual conflict occurs not just on the mating market and within mating relationships but sometimes continues in the aftermath of a breakup. It also highlights that dyadic sexual conflict often occurs within a broader social context, of which triadic sexual conflict is one persistent and recurrent form.

Discussion

In addition to adaptations for mating cooperation, which are especially critical in species that have long-term mating as a core reproductive strategy, sexual conflict pervades all sexually reproducing species. It produces adaptations in one sex that function to influence individual members of the other to be closer to the actor's optima, counteradaptation defenses that combat that influence and shift to different optima, counter-counter adaptations, and so on. Over evolutionary time, these cycles produce antagonistic co-evolutionary arms races analogous to those in predators and prey. In slow-reproducing species like humans, these co-evolutionary processes cannot be observed in real time, although they have been observed directly and repeatedly in controlled experiments in fast-reproducing species such as fruit flies (Rice et al., 2006). What can be observed in humans are the psychological and behavioral footprints of sexual conflict and sexually antagonistic co-evolution. This article briefly reviewed several such footprints in the psychology of different forms of sex-linked sexual deception and the corresponding reactionary sex-linked anger, sexual exploitation and anti-exploitation defenses, patterned forms of sexual regret, motivations for infidelity, design features of the jealousy defense, and stalking in the aftermath of a breakup.

Although I have focused primarily on some of the most important and pervasive domains of sexual conflict in the three temporal phases of mating, sexual conflict in fact pervades many human social relationships. It occurs within mateships in other forms such as conflict over parental investment, conflict over pooled resources, and conflict over investments in one set of kin versus the other (Conroy-Beam et al., 2015). It occurs between parents and children, as when fathers monitor and guard their daughter's sexual conduct in ways that conflict with the daughter's fitness interests (Apostolou, 2013; Perilloux, Fleischman, & Buss, 2008). It occurs in opposite-sex friendships, as when sexual or romantic interests remain unreciprocated (Bleske-Rechek

et al., 2012). It occurs in the workplace in predictable patterns of sexual harassment and defenses against harassment (Buss, 2016). In this sense, sexual conflict is not a narrow flashpoint but rather a frequently occurring set of forces that permeate many domains of human social interaction.

Recommended Readings

Arnqvist, G., & Rowe, L. (2013). (See References). This is a classic and relatively comprehensive summary of sexual conflict theory, with hundreds of empirical studies testing sexual conflict in insects and other nonhuman animals.

Buss, D. M. (2016). (See References). This book provides an up-to-date overview of strategies of human mating, with one large chapter and portions of others devoted to sexual conflict in humans, including mate guarding, infidelity, intimate partner violence, deception, and sexual assault.

Buss, D. M., & Duntley, J. D. (2008). (See References). This article provides a theoretical overview of adaptations for exploitation in humans and coevolved anti-exploitation defenses; forms of sexual conflict, such as sexual infidelity and anti-infidelity defenses, are framed as one subset of exploitability adaptations.

Chapman, T. (2014). (See References). This paper, by one of the pioneers of sexual conflict theory, provides a user-friendly introduction to the basic logic of the evolutionary biology of sexual conflict.

Goetz, C. D., Easton, J. A., Lewis, D. M., & Buss, D. M. (2012). (See References). This paper focuses on one domain of sexual conflict—identifying cues to sexual exploitability of women, which include vulnerability to sexual deception and sexual assault, and men's attraction to those cues in short-term mating contexts.

Haselton, M. G., Buss, D. M., Oubaid, V., & Angleitner, A. (2005). (See References). This paper provides theory and empirical evidence from two cultures of the ways in which men and women deceive each other in sexual and mating contexts, as well as empirical tests of hypothesized adaptations to prevent becoming a victim of sexual deception.

Shackelford, T. K., & Goetz, A. T. (Eds.). (2012). (See References). This handbook provides excellent chapters on various aspects of sexual conflict in humans, including chapters on sexual conflict prior to mating, during mating, and after conception.

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