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Sex differences in the design features of socially contingent mating adaptations

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Abstract: Schmitt's study provides strong support for sexual strategies theory (Buss & Schmitt 1993) – that men and women *both* have evolved a complex menu of mating strategies, selectively deployed depending on personal, social, and ecological contexts. It also simultaneously refutes social structural theories founded on the core premise that women and men are sexually monomorphic in their psychology of human mating. Further progress depends on identifying evolved psychological design features

sensitive to the costs and benefits of pursuing each strategy from the menu, which vary across mating milieus. These design features, like many well-documented mating adaptations, are likely to be highly sex-differentiated.

According to the sexual strategies theory, both men and women possess an evolved menu of mating strategies, selectively activated by particular features of the personal, social, and ecological context (Buss & Schmitt 1993). Although both sexes possess short- and long-term strategies at a broad level of description, their mating psychologies contain many sex-linked design features that accompany each strategy. These include sex differences in mate preferences when pursuing each mating strategy, corresponding sex differences in tactics for attracting mates, and sex differences in the conditions that lead to the termination of mating relationships (Buss 2003). In the context of short-term mating, they include a greater desire for sexual variety by men than by women, indicated by well-documented design features such as the number of partners desired, the length of time elapsed before seeking sexual intercourse, the sexual overperception bias, a decrease in standards for consenting to sex with strangers, affective valence shifts promoting a hasty postcopulatory departure, and many others (Buss 2003; Haselton & Buss 2000). The sexual strategies theory also proposes that women will obtain reproductive benefits from pursuing short-term mating, such as immediate resources, better genes, and trading up, that differ from those obtained by men such as a direct increase in offspring number (e.g., Gangestad & Thornhill 1997b; Greiling & Buss 2000). As a consequence, the contexts in which women versus men actively pursue short-term mating are predicted to differ. In short, the sexual strategies theory proposes that men and women differ fundamentally in many design features of their evolved psychology of mating.

In sharp contrast, a core premise of social role and socialization theories of human mating such as the structural powerlessness hypothesis (Buss & Barnes 1986) and its later elaborations in social structural theories (Eagly & Wood 1999) is that men and women are fundamentally identical in their mating psychology, possessing no evolved sex-linked psychological design features. Rather, according to these theories, observed sex differences in mate preferences, desires, and strategies owe their existence to sex-linked socialization practices, the societal assignment of men and women to different roles, and societal factors that grant power to the sexes differentially. If the role assignments were reversed, for example, then these theories necessarily predict sexual reversals – that men more than women would value economic resources in a mate, that women more than men would place a premium on physical attractiveness and youth in mate selection, and that women would experience a greater desire for sexual variety than men. Furthermore, given the fundamental premise of social structural theories that male and female minds and brains are identical in the mating domain, containing no sex-linked psychological adaptations, the sexes should respond to the same personal, social, and ecological factors in the same ways.

The impressive study conducted by Schmitt and his colleagues adds to a growing body of empirical evidence that provides strong support for the sexual strategies theory and a resounding refutation of social structural theories and their variants. The universality of sex differences on the Sociosexual Orientation Inventory (SOI) across the 48 nations studied confirms a core prediction of the sexual strategies theory and its predecessors, anchored in Trivers' theory of parental investment and sexual selection. It supports the broad notion that men have an evolved mating psychology that differs dramatically from that of women, and the specific hypothesis about a profound sex difference in desire for sexual variety. The data simultaneously refute the notion that men and women are psychologically monomorphic in mating desire, falsifying current social structural theories (Eagly & Wood 1999) and their earlier conceptual forebears (Buss & Barnes 1986).

These findings, in conjunction with dozens of others (Buss 2003), lead to the unusual position of disavowing a hypothesis I

previously articulated and also disagreeing with Schmitt's implication that social structural theories are needed for a comprehensive conceptualization of human mating strategies. The structural powerlessness hypothesis (Buss & Barnes 1986) and subsequent social structural variants are fundamentally indefensible, because their core premise of male and female identity of underlying psychology was always theoretically problematic and is now known to be empirically false. The notion that sexual selection would fashion male and female bodies for different mating strategies while leaving male and female brains and minds identical contravenes everything that we now know about adaptation and natural selection. And although the modest cultural variation in the magnitude of sex differences in the SOI is theoretically important, I suggest that it is not adequately explained by nebulous theoretical constructs such as structural powerlessness, gender empowerment, patriarchy, or social structural roles (see Buss [1996a; 1996b] for more detailed conceptual critiques of these concepts).

Rather, I propose that the theoretical integration that Schmitt appropriately calls for will be found in part by identifying the specific evolved mating mechanisms that are responsive to the particular *costs* and *benefits* of pursuing short- and long-term mating strategies, which are almost certainly highly sex-differentiated in design (Greiling & Buss 2000). I propose, for example, that women have evolved mating mechanisms that are highly sensitive to the *reputational costs* of pursuing short-term mating in their local mating environment. In large Western urban cultures with high geographical mobility (surely a correlate of measures of "gender empowerment"), short-term mating can be pursued in relative anonymity, decreasing the reputational damage that women often accrue from pursuing a promiscuous mating strategy. In cultures more characterized by small-group living and little geographical mobility, anonymous sex is more difficult and the reputational damage that women acquire from short-term mating can severely handicap their long-term mate value. By identifying *when* women secure specific benefits from short-term mating, such as needed resources, better genes, or better mates while simultaneously avoiding the costs of short-term mating such as reputational damage and a decline in perceived long-term mate value, we will attain a deeper understanding of the cultural and subcultural variation in the selective pursuit of this strategy from the human menu.

In summary, Schmitt makes a large contribution by identifying the universality of sex differences in one important aspect of the psychology of human mating strategies, as well as by identifying cultural variation in expression from the menu of human mating strategies that is correlated with well-defined and theoretically cogent concepts such as sex ratio. His work simultaneously refutes the core premise of social structural theories, which are anchored in the premise of sexual monomorphism of evolved psychological design. The field of evolutionary psychology has identified a large menu of human mating strategies, including short-term, long-term, and mixed mating strategies, the pursuit of which is highly sensitive to context, as initially postulated by sexual strategies theory. Future theoretical and empirical work in the important domain of human mating will reside not with vague constructs such as gender empowerment or dubious notions about socially assigned roles to passive recipients. Scientific advances will come from identifying the specialized psychological design that determines which mating strategies from the universal menu will be deployed by each sex in particular contexts.