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Evolution of Desire, The

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Synonyms

[Attraction](#); [Mate preferences](#); [Mate retention](#); [Mate selection](#); [Mating](#); [Mating psychology](#); [Mating strategies](#)

Definition

This book provides a unified theory of human mating strategies, anchored in the best scientific evidence available on sexual psychology.

Introduction

The Evolution of Desire: Strategies of Human Mating was first published by Basic Books (Buss 1994). It took 4 years to write and represented a synthesis of a decade of research on the psychology of human mating by the author. Two chapters were added to a revised edition in 2003, although the original ten chapters remained in unmodified form. *Desire* was updated and revised thoroughly from top to bottom (Buss 2016) and represented an explosion of empirical

research in the years since its original publication. *Desire* has become a citation classic (more than 2,000 scholarly citations as of 2016). It is widely used in college courses. It is used by scientists to guide mating research. And it is used by everyday readers to inform their own mating lives.

Although one previous excellent book had been written about the evolution of human sexuality – Donald Symons’s (1979) classic treatise, *The Evolution of Human Sexuality* – the goals of *The Evolution of Desire* were broader than sexuality per se. It aimed to look at human evolved psychology of mating more expansively, including all the action that happens prior to, and after, sexual activity proper – strategies of mate competition, mate attraction, mate selection, mate retention, mate poaching, conflict between the sexes, mate ejection, and remating over the life span.

A key theoretical premise of *The Evolution of Desire* is that humans have a menu of mating strategies, not just a single one, and that some of these strategies show important gender differences. Humans most obviously have long-term mating (sometimes called pair-bonding, committed mating, or marriage), although this turns out to be rare among mammalian species, characterizing perhaps only 3 %. Humans also have short-term mating or casual sex, serial mating, mate poaching, and infidelity, which represents a mixed mating strategy of one long-term mateship with some sex on the side. Understanding all mating strategies requires first identifying what women and men want. It all starts with desires in a mate.

Desires in Human Mating

What people desire in a mate, selective mate preferences, captures a key component of Darwin's theory of sexual selection. Desires draw us to some potential mates. They repel us from others. Iterated over generations, the desires of one sex determine the qualities favored or shunned, producing evolution or change over time. Prior to 1989, little was known about what women and men wanted in long-term mates. David Buss's 37 culture study, involving 10,047 individuals on five continents and six islands, provided the first massive cross-cultural findings on this key topic (Buss 1989a).

The Evolution of Desire synthesized this and all scientific studies available at the time in Chapter 2 (What Women Want), Chapter 3 (What Men Want), and Chapter 4 (Casual Sex). These chapters describe sexual similarities in mate preferences, universal sex differences, and cultural variation. Universal preferences include the desire for mates who are kind, understanding, intelligent, dependable, emotionally stable, and healthy. Importantly, people worldwide want mates with whom they are in love and who are in love with them, overturning conventional social science beliefs that love was a Western European invention and not a universal across cultures. The emotion of love exists worldwide, appears in long-term but not short-term mating, and serves as a form of psychological commitment – an idea articulated independently by the economist Robert Frank (1988) and David Buss (1988) the same year.

Desire also described universal sex differences. Women more than men desire mates who provide good economic resources, as well as the attributes linked with long-term resource acquisition such as ambition, industriousness, and social status. Men more than women prioritize physical attractiveness and relative youth – important cues to fertility. These are universal sex differences that were predicted in advance by evolutionary hypotheses; they have been robustly replicated by dozens of researchers since *Desire*; and they show no signs of diminution over time. Cultures also differed dramatically in some desires, such as

the desire for virginity in a potential spouse. Swedes, for example, did not value virginity at all, whereas Chinese at the time saw virginity as virtually indispensable (Buss 1989a).

Chapter 4 delves into the deep scientific evidence for sex differences in the psychology of short-term mating (as contrasted with long-term mating). David Schmitt and David Buss were the first to systematically document gender differences in mate preferences as a function of this temporal context (Buss and Schmitt 1993). Men, for example, prioritized high sex drive, sexual experience, and physical attractiveness in short-term mating, while despising prudishness and a low sex drive. Women also increased the importance they attach to physical appearance, but ramp up their desire for immediate resource displays from a man. Chapter 4 also delves into the scientific evidence for gender differences in the desire for sexual variety. It highlights its many psychological design features of short-term mating psychology, including attraction to novel partners, letting little time elapse before seeking sex, relaxing standards for a partner, and showing a sexual over-perception bias that causes men to over-infer women's sexual interest. It also speculated about men's attraction decrement post-intercourse – designed to motivate a hasty post-copulatory departure and minimize investment and commitment – a hypothesis that was subsequently tested and supported only for men pursuing a short-term mating strategy, as predicted (Haselton and Buss 2001).

Mate Competition: Attraction and Derogation

Several chapters in *Desire* capture what is known about intrasexual mate competition – the second key component of Darwin's theory of sexual selection. They focus on two generic strategies – *tactics of attraction* and *derogation of competitors*. According to sexual selection theory, these should focus on dimensions desired by the other sex. Stated differently, the desires of one sex establish the ground rules of same-sex mate competition. Studies bear out this key prediction.

Both men and women display and deploy tactics that involve acts of kindness, intelligence, and brimming good health. Sex-differentiated tactics involve resource display, physical protection, and appearance enhancement. Women, for example, spend more than nine times as much money on beauty products. Men display status, ambition, and resources and show a willingness to commit them to one woman, at least in long-term mating.

Tactics for attracting short-term mates differ somewhat. Schmitt and Buss (1996) found that men seeking short-term mates were more likely to engage in immediate resource display, whereas women were more likely to give off cues to immediate sexual access. Because more men than women seek short-term mates, women generally have their pick on the short-term mating market, and these sexual signals are extremely effective for them. Men sometimes deceive women, feigning long-term interest for the purpose of gaining short-term sex. *Desire* goes into depth about these and other tactics of short-term and long-term mate attraction.

Derogation of competitors – the ways in which we use language to impugn the character and desirability of our rivals – is a second strategy in the arsenal of human mate competition. And the desires of one sex again set the ground rules of the game. Men are more likely than women to impugn a rival's status, resources, and athletic prowess. Women are more likely than men to derogate their rival's physical attractiveness (e.g., “she has heavy thighs”) and sexual selectivity (e.g., “she slept with the whole football team”). Men seeking a long-term mate are hugely turned off by a woman's promiscuity, since it jeopardizes his paternity certainty. They are not averse to this quality when seeking a short-term mate. As the actress Mae West once noted, “Men like a woman with a past because they hope history will repeat itself.”

Conflict Between the Sexes

One chapter of *Desire* that garners much attention centers on sexual conflict – the ways in which men and women interfere with each other's mating

strategies. Conflict between the sexes occurs on the mating market. One example stems from differing perceptions of mate value, such as when a man approaches an attractive woman he believes is within his mate value range, but she does not concur. Another source of conflict is when one person is seeking a long-term mate and the other a short-term mate, which has selected for strategies of deception. A man might feign long-term interest for short-term sexual access. A woman might present herself as costless sex and then attempt to convert the relationship into one of long-term commitment. These are all forms of “strategic interference,” whereby a member of one gender blocks or impedes a strategy pursued by the other (Buss 1989b).

Committed couples sometimes break up. The causes are well predicted by sexual strategies theory and a deep understanding of human mate preferences. Men's failure in resource provisioning, for example, violates what women want. Women's decrement in appearance or older age sometimes causes men break up. Conflict over pooled resources and over in-laws are common sources of friction. And infidelity, sexual or financial, violates desires and often leads to breakups.

Mate Retention and Mate Ejection

Tactics of mate retention and mate ejection also should follow the logic of evolved desires. Successful tactics of mate retention embody what a mate wants, such as kindness, attentiveness, love, affection, gifts, resource flow, and sexual access. *Desire* describes how men's efforts at mate retention are partly a function of women's youth and attractiveness (Buss and Shackelford 1997). Women allocate more effort to retaining mates who are higher in status and income.

Successful tactics of mate ejection are typically those that violate men's and women's initial desires. Being cruel violates the desire for kindness. Having an affair violates the desire for sexual loyalty. Withdrawing resources violates the desire for provisioning.

Mating Over the Life Span

Nothing remains static over time. Humans undergo some predictable changes, but also show enormous variation in those changes. Fertility, for example, inexorably declines with age for both sexes. Importantly, women and men show different life span fertility curves, with women showing an earlier and steeper decline than men. Access to status and resources is considerably more variable. Male status and resources rise through the 20s and 30s, along with hunting skills in traditional societies and job promotions in modern societies. Nonetheless, some experience dramatic declines with age, and others experience dramatic rises with age. In short, status and resources over the life span peak later than does fertility and show much greater variability over the life span than does fertility. These life span conditions influence important dimensions of mating – whether couples stay together or divorce – individual mate values upon reentry into the mating market and many others.

Condition-Dependent Mating Adaptations

Throughout the book, *Desire* emphasizes that human mating adaptations are contingent on key contexts. Personal mate value, for example, is a context that affects one's ability to implement a preferred mating strategy. Sex ratio in the mating pool – the number of men relative to the number of women – influences both mate value (the rarer sex has higher on-average mate value) and also whether mating strategies shift more to short-term mating (e.g., for men, when there is a surplus of women) or long-term mating (for men, when there is a surplus of men). Our mating psychology is also contingent on many other circumstances: parasite prevalence in the local culture or ecology, the degree to which parents and kin influence and constrain an individual's mating decisions, women's access to resources, level of gender equality, and many others.

Conclusion

In 1994, *The Evolution of Desire* crystallized a new field – strategies of human mating. In the decades since its original publication, this field has mushroomed. Thousands of scientific articles have been published on the topic since 1994, and the 2016 revised and updated edition of *Desire* highlights some of the most important scientific developments. We now know the broad outlines of the strategies of human mating. But new work continues to reveal facets of our mating psychology previously undiscovered. In this sense, the scientific understanding of human mating strategies keeps expanding and deepening. Given the centrality of reproduction to evolution by selection, and of mating to reproduction, it should perhaps not be surprising that human mating psychology shows this enormous complexity of design. There still remains much mating gold to be discovered by intrepid scientific explorers.

Cross-References

- ▶ [David M. Buss](#)
- ▶ [Long-term Mate Preferences](#)
- ▶ [Sexual Strategies Theory](#)
- ▶ [Short-Term Mate Preferences](#)

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