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The Darwin Is in the Details

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Ever since Bishop Wilburforce asked Darwin's cousin about the side of his family on which he claimed descent from an ape, evolutionary theorists have been harangued with eloquently uninformed critiques (Kenrick, 1995). Eagly and Wood (June 1999) provided a rare and welcome exception: a data-based challenge by researchers making an effort to understand evolutionary hypotheses. Unfortunately, as well-meaning students learn in difficult courses and as well-meaning researchers learn in analyzing data, slight misunderstandings can compound into very wrong conclusions. In this comment, we examine three examples of such misunderstandings in Eagly and Wood's article.

Evolutionary Models of Sex Differences Are Based on a Much Broader Foundation Than Eagly and Wood (1999) Imply

Eagly and Wood (1999) suggested that evolutionary hypotheses about sex differences balance on thin speculations regarding ancestral human environments. But those hypotheses instead stand on solid principles of sexual selection and differential parental investment—principles founded on thousands of observations spanning the animal kingdom. Any birding guide reveals that when the sexes differ in coloration or display, male birds are usually gaudier, more vocal, and more territorially aggressive. According to parental investment theory, as either sex increases parental investment, it becomes more selective about mates, and the other sex consequently becomes more intrasexually competitive. Because female birds' minimal investment is a large egg, they comparison shop among male birds, who compete to be chosen. There are exceptions, like phalaropes, with the females being the more colorful and competitive sex of the species. However, these exceptions confirm the rule: Phalaropes are raised by their fathers, while their mothers move on to other mates.

Humans are obviously influenced by norms, and these clearly vary across cultures. However, women's greater attraction to social dominance not only parallels the expected pattern in species with high female parental investment but also accompanies many other cross-species sex differences that fit elegantly into an evolutionary framework. In species with differential parental investment, for example, males are more intrasexually competitive and aggressive (Geary, 1998). Across societies, men have always killed one another substantially more than have women (Daly & Wilson, 1988). Many other data support this nomological network, including findings linking hormones such as testosterone and estrogen to sex-role behaviors in nonhuman species (e.g., Mazur & Booth, 1998). Human social role assignments cannot explain many of the interconnected details.

Subtle but Important Details of Age Preferences in Mates Favor Evolutionary Over Role Perspective

Eagly and Wood (1999) misconstrued previous age preference findings as supporting the "common knowledge" that men prefer younger women. If men's preferences were indeed so simple, that would be consistent with either the evolutionary view that men seek fertility or

the sociocultural view that older men and younger women fit “the culturally expected pattern of breadwinner and homemaker” (Eagly & Wood, 1999, p. 415). Because younger women generally have less income, status, and education than their older mates, Eagly and Wood reasoned, traditional age discrepancies facilitate the norm-driven “power gap.” They dismissed a potential problem with this explanation: “Although Kenrick and Keefe (1992) showed that teenage boys prefer girls of similar age, this tendency is most likely a product of the lower age limits that exist for culturally and maturationally appropriate partners” (p. 416). Unfortunately, this is an incorrect characterization of this literature, which instead showed that men in their 20s are interested in women up to five years older than they are and that teenage boys are attracted to women up to seven years older than they are (cf. Kenrick, Gabrielidis, Keefe, & Cornelius, 1996). For example, an average 16-year-old boy is attracted to women ranging in age from 15 to 24 years and views women in their 20s as relatively more attractive than similarly aged mates. Contrary to the presumed norm, only men above the age of 30 are disinterested in women older than themselves. Have teenage boys failed to learn sex-role norms? Hardly: They are the most rigidly sex-typed developmental group (Shaffer, 1994). A parsimonious explanation of why males across the lifespan are attracted to women in their 20s is that these women display signs ultimately linked with fertility. One could hypothesize a new, more complex social norm, but other social scientists have, like Eagly and Wood, presumed a simple norm: men “should be” older, taller, and higher status (e.g., Presser, 1975).

Relationship Between Gender Equality and Sex Differences Does Not Contradict Evolutionary Models

Eagly and Wood (1999) showed that as societies approach gender equality in resource access, some sex differences in mate preferences decrease. However, evolved mechanisms are not environmentally insensitive. If cravings for sweets and fats are now satisfied by candy and buttered popcorn, this does not disprove that these evolved tastes were previously satisfied by fruits and animal meat. Just as people with access to candy experience a decrease in their desire to eat fruit, women may have evolved a tendency to seek resources in a mate, but that tendency’s strength may vary as women are deprived of or offered direct access to such resources.

Opposition or Interaction?

Eagly and Wood (1999) assumed that men and women, playing out roles in cooperative child-rearing alliances, consciously capitalize on their relative comparative advantages, men being larger and stronger than women and women being naturally suited for childbirth and nursing. However, their assumption raises a host of questions. Humans are capable of rational thought, but does that mean they rely exclusively on rational thought in mate selection and childrearing and have cognitively reinvented the complex but non-rational mechanisms producing parallel sex differences in other species? Why do men and women differ in size in the first place? How do biological differences in morphology and hormonal production contribute to the cultural norms humans construct? Eagly and Wood acknowledged complex interactive adaptations involved in language acquisition but seem to deny such mechanisms for sex differences. Yet, details in the data from other animal species, the effects of hormones on behavior, and the specifics of current human mate preferences suggest that conscious navigation through the world of artificial human norms is not all there is to it. It is time to stop arguing about evolved dispositions versus social roles

(as in Eagly & Wood's title) and address tough questions about how social roles and evolved dispositions mutually constrain and construct one another.

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