

Commentary/Mazur & Booth: Testosterone and dominance

Why is testosterone associated with divorce in men?

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Abstract: There is evidence that in women high levels of testosterone are associated with more sexual partners and more permissive sexual attitudes. If a similar relationship holds true for men, the higher basal testosterone levels of divorced and unmarried men may be caused by this relationship rather than by testosterone's effect on dominance striving.

In this timely and thoughtful target article, Mazur & Booth (M&B) provide abundant empirical support for their claim that testosterone (T) in men both facilitates dominance challenges and rises in response to a successful outcome. Their panel study of marriage and divorce among 2,100 male U.S. Air Force veterans also shows convincingly that the relationship between hormones and marital behavior is reciprocal: men with higher basal T levels are less likely to marry and more likely to divorce, but T levels also increase prior to and following a divorce.

It is not necessarily true, however, that the relationship between basal T and marital history is due to T's effect on striving for dominance. The relevance of the panel study to M&B's topic is based in part on their suggestion that "men with high basal T tend toward dominating or antisocial behavior which disrupts family functioning, leading eventually to divorce" (sect. 9). This may be so, but there are other possibilities.

One is that high T is associated not only with dominance seeking but also with a greater propensity toward sexual variety. This possibility is suggested by two recent studies of women. One study found that women with high levels of T (also androstenedione and estradiol) had more sexual partners and claimed to need less commitment from a man before engaging in sex (Cashdan 1995). The other study found that free T in young women using oral contraceptives was negatively associated with restrictive sexual morality as measured by questionnaire (Bancroft et al. 1991). I know of no similar studies in men (although there are abundant data on T and libido, well summarized in the target article), but if men with high basal T levels are, as is suggested for women, more inclined toward having a variety of sexual partners, it would be reasonable to suppose that they might be less likely to remain married.

As M&B note, findings on hormones and dominance in women are scanty. My reading of the literature is that androgens are associated with assertive and probably dominating *behavior* in women, but whether or not this enhances (or results from) their dominance *status* depends on what type of behavior is associated with high status in a particular competitive domain. Although dominating behavior might usually enhance dominance status for men, this is not necessarily the case for women. Our understanding of hormones and dominance in women will require a better understanding of competition among women in domains that are important to them.