
Original Articles

The Evolutionary Psychology of Extrapair Sex: The Role of Fluctuating Asymmetry

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This study explored evolutionary hypotheses concerning extrapair sex (or EPCs: extrapair copulations). Based on recent notions about sexual selection, we predicted that (a) men's number of EPCs would correlate negatively with their fluctuating asymmetry, a measure of the extent to which developmental design is imprecisely expressed, and (b) men's number of times having been an EPC partner of a woman would negatively correlate with their fluctuating asymmetry. In a sample of college heterosexual couples, both hypotheses were supported. In addition, men's physical attractiveness independently predicted how often they had been an EPC partner. Women's anxious attachment style positively covaried with their number of EPC partners, whereas their avoidant attachment style negatively covaried with their number of EPC partners. © Elsevier Science Inc., 1997

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As recorded by poets, novelists, and psychologists alike, sexual relationships evoke emotions distinct both in intensity and kind. And, of all events within relationships that evoke strong emotional reactions, extrapair sexual relations (or EPCs: extrapair copulations) are perhaps those that can lead to the most destructive consequences. When discovered by one's mate, EPCs not only can cause relationships to dissolve (Hite 1987), but, after reviewing the relevant empirical literature, Daly and Wilson (1988) concluded that the most

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common cause of spousal homicide is male suspicion of his mate's infidelity (see also Wilson and Daly 1992).

In light of the clear significance of EPCs to the lives of individuals and relationships, systematic and theoretically motivated research examining the factors that give rise to them is surprisingly sparse. Most research on extramarital sex (for a review, see Thompson 1983) or nonmarital extradyadic sex (Hansen 1986) has been atheoretical (for recent exceptions, see Baker and Bellis 1993; Bellis and Baker 1990). The paucity of theoretically motivated research cannot be due merely to the infrequency of EPCs. Large surveys of married women in the U.S. estimate that between 15% (Laumann et al. 1994) and 70% (Hite 1987) have had extramarital sex, with the median estimate being about 30% (for a review, see Thompson 1983; also Kinsey et al. 1953). Typically, 25%–50% of married U.S. men surveyed report having had extramarital sex (Thompson 1983; see also Kinsey et al. 1948; Laumann et al. 1994). And, 6% of a sample of British women with one main partner reported their *last* act of sexual intercourse to be an EPC (Bellis and Baker 1990). Blood group studies of paternity in England have revealed levels of nonpaternity for the purported father of about 6% (Edwards 1957).

In the research reported here, we adopted an evolutionary perspective to explore individual difference factors associated with EPCs of college students involved in romantic relationships. While sometimes leading to marriage, college romantic relationships may, on average, differ from more long-lasting mateships in a number of ways. Nevertheless, these relationships are convenient to study, extrapair sex outside of them is not uncommon, and theory and data indicate that in a variety of ways we should expect the factors associated with phenomena in them to be similar to those associated with the same phenomena in long-term mateships (Hansen 1986). Moreover, EPCs in college relationships can bring about many of the same disruptive consequences that extrapair sex in marriages brings about. Hence, EPCs in student relationships may shed light on evolutionary hypotheses.

EVOLUTIONARY PSYCHOLOGY AND EPCs

From an evolutionary psychological perspective, relatively long-term sexual and romantic relationships partly represent the expression of adaptations, individuals' design features forged through the accumulative effects of differential replication of genes during the course of human history. Purportedly, one overarching function of the propensity to form long-term sexual relationships is that such relationships provide a social context in which childrearing would have been efficient and successful within ancestral environments (Mellen 1981). Of course, in this age of readily available and reliable contraception, long-term sexual relationships can be completely unlinked with reproduction and parenting. This fact, however, in no way gainsays a historically adaptive, reproductive significance of the psychological design that underlies the formation and maintenance of sexual relationships (Buss 1991, 1995; Symons 1987, 1992; Thornhill 1990; Tooby and Cosmides 1992).

From an adaptationist perspective, why do EPCs occur? Because the roles that men and women play in reproduction differ, the functional significance of EPCs

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