

Steven Pinker's correspondence with journalist Dan Slater, 2012

1. Dan Slater had asked me in email, "I'm trying to get a sense of what it might mean for the Buss/Schmitt position within evolutionary psychology if the gender differences they've been trying to explain don't exist."

Dear Dan,

Seems like the answer to your question is simple: if the gender differences that Buss and others are trying to explain don't exist, then what it means is that their theory is wrong.

That having been said, it seems to me that Buss et al., are right not to back down: it's extraordinarily unlikely there are no sex differences in sexual selectivity. If that were true, life would be unrecognizable: heterosexual male prostitutes would have as many customers as female ones, female bosses would hit on their male employees as often as the reverse, there would be as much heterosexual visual porn consumed by women as at men, straight men could get laid any time they wanted (as easily as gay men), there would be cultures out there that reverse the familiar sex difference, and so on. These sanity checks are consistent with the experimental literature from Buss, Hatfield, Bailey, and others, which shows consistently across a variety of methods (questionnaires, in vivo field studies, physiological reactions, surveys of personal ads, etc.) showing sex differences in desire for no-strings sex, together with more recent internet porn surveys by Ogas and others.

I saw one study (by Finkel et al) that claims to find no difference in sexual selectivity, published in *Psychological Science* recently, but it was bad. For one thing, their data contradict their main claim – they actually did find a substantial effect of gender, with men being less selective (which they then tried to explain away). For another, they never acknowledged a crucial point: that they are studying the special situation in which women have already consented (or have been instructed – they give no details about this part of their methods) to approach strangers for possible romantic or sexual opportunities. That is, they ignored the stage in the mating process in which the largest sex differences are predicted to occur, namely whether people are willing to approach strangers for possible romantic opportunities in the first place. Nor did they provide any evidence for their main assumptions, both dubious – that men are socially esteemed for indiscriminately seeking sex partners (it's surely the other way around -- there are numerous pejoratives for such men: sleazebags, leeches, dirty old men, horny professors, womanizers, etc.), and that men are more likely than women to approach things in general, regardless of what they are. The only reason this flawed paper was published was that it challenged an evolutionary hypothesis (the journal *Psychological Science* has a history of this double standard), in particular a sex difference—as the Larry Summers incident shows, claims about sex differences are still politically inflammatory in the academy.

Not being an expert in this area, I don't know whether there is some vast amount of new research published in specialized journals which completely overturns the prior literature together with everyday experience and common sense. But I'm skeptical, particularly if the Finkel study is representative.

Sometimes it's suggested that the younger generation has cast out the old stereotypes and that both genders are avidly seeking meaningless hookups, giving blow jobs in stairwells, etc. – the Caitlin Flanagan/Tom Wolfe stereotype of young people. When I've mentioned this in class, the students roll their eyes.

Best,
Steve

2. Slater replied to me with the points made in the New York Times piece. Here is my second reply:

Hi, Dan,

I disagree about methodology. I consider the Hatfield study to be one of the great studies in the history of psychology – a study with real behavior (as opposed to questionnaires or artificial lab behavior); a big, massive effect, that doesn't need statistics; a number of replications; and controls for alternative explanations. The manipulation can't be that artificial – half the women and men accepted the date, and three quarters of the men accepted the sexual proposition – and it was in a real situation, calling for real behavior. Compare the current replicability crisis in social psychology – any study that reports a counterintuitive finding (i.e., a low Bayesian prior), that has not been replicated, and that has a small, quantitative effect is very likely to be an artifact.

For related reasons, a study which shows you can push some phenomenon around a bit at the margins is of dubious relevance to whether the phenomenon exists. Men, on average, are taller than women. Let them all wear shoes and the effect is smaller (because some women wear platforms or heels). That doesn't mean that the difference in height is a social construction, or a product of expectations or stigma.

(As I mentioned in the previous email, many “stigma” arguments, such as that men gain prestige for screwing their secretaries and getting fellatio from a hooker in the front seat of a car, verge on hallucinatory.)

It's certainly true that some sex differences (e.g., in education, employment) are being eliminated or reversed, but there was never any reason to believe these had a biological basis in the first place. It would be a wild extrapolation to conclude that the two sexes are biologically indistinguishable. See the article by Kay Hymowitz in *City Journal* this week (which reiterates an argument made by my sister Susan Pinker in her book *The Sexual Paradox*) for a number of areas in which the gender gap is not closing despite herculean efforts.

I think you're misremembering the Gould debate and mischaracterizing Buss et al. The hardliners are all on the social-constructionist side. It is not the case that there are extremists on one side who deny culture and say it's all biological, and extremists on the other side who say it's all culture and deny biology, and the truth is somewhere in between. Evolutionary psychologists like Buss unanimously, repeatedly, and from the beginning, acknowledge the effects of culture; no one that I know of has ever claimed that any human trait is 100% determined by biology. There are, in contrast, hardliners, quasi-religious fanatics, who acknowledge no role whatsoever for biology when it comes to sex differences and other human traits. Trust me on this one – I wrote a book about it (*The Blank Slate*), with dozens of quotes to prove it. I haven't seen the Schmitt article, but if they're pushing back against studies like Finkel, it's not out of quasi-religious dogma, or an irrational investment in positions they've staked out in the past; it's because they still have the weight of evidence on their side.

I also couldn't disagree with you more on this: "it's interesting to see how various scientific theories often magically support the status-quo thinking of their era. I imagine it was comforting for the men and women of Trivers' time to hear such seemingly immutable explanations for stereotypical gender roles." Among the academic and journalistic circles that got to comment on Trivers' theory, the prejudice was massively in the other direction, and the sociobiologists and evolutionary psychologists were bitterly vilified and sometimes physically attacked. It's still close to career suicide in academia to pursue biological explanations of sex differences, whereas no one has ever suffered from career damage in journalism or academia for saying it's all due to stigma, prejudice, and hidden barriers – on the contrary, it's a ticket to professional advancement. As a veteran of this issue, I can give you many, many examples. Again, if you think that the theory of sexual selection got a free ride because it harmonized with cultural expectations, and that the theory of social construction bravely fought against entrenched privilege, I think the evidence shows that it is the other way around.

As for greater permissiveness, promiscuity, lower marriage rates, rising marriage age, and so on – which theories do these contradict? Sexual selection does not predict puritanism, marital fidelity, low marriage ages, etc. – it sounds to me as if you're blurring together all the features of sexuality that were true in the 1950s, and attributing them all to the theory of sexual selection.

Best,
Steve
