



The evolution of rape: The fitness benefits and costs of a forced-sex mating strategy in an evolutionary context

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ABSTRACT

Past theorizing on the evolution of rape adduced the hypothesis that this act constitutes the behavioral expression of a mechanism which has evolved to enable men of low mate value to circumvent female choice. This has recently been questioned on the grounds that during human evolution, women's mate choices were controlled by their parents. It, therefore, remains unclear which were the evolutionary forces likely to have shaped this mechanism and whether such a mechanism exists in the first place. Accordingly, this paper employs anthropological and historical evidence in an attempt to reconstruct the evolutionary context in which a forced-sex mating strategy emerged. On the basis of this evidence, it is argued that forced sex is the outcome of an innate conditional strategy which enables men to circumvent parental and female choice when they experience a competitive disadvantage, or when the costs of doing so are low. The implications of the operation of this mechanism during human evolution are further explored.

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1. Introduction

Certain men under certain conditions pursue a forced-sex mating strategy (i.e., rape). This raises the question of the evolutionary origins of this behavior. Two main hypotheses have been proposed. First, this strategy is the byproduct of other adaptations such as a high libido, desire for novelty in sexual partners, and willingness to engage in casual sex (Thornhill & Palmer, 2000). Second, rape is an adaptation that has evolved to enable men to increase their reproductive success (Thornhill & Palmer, 2000).

In the latter hypothesis, the asymmetry in parental investment, with females investing more in their offspring than males, turns the former into the scarce reproductive resource over which the latter strive to gain sexual access (Trivers, 1972). This puts women in a position where they are able to exercise choice. Women do not choose randomly, but instead prefer men with characteristics such as good genes, high social status, and control of resources which are beneficial for them (Buss, 2003).

These female preferences mean that men who lack desirable qualities are unlikely to be chosen as mates, suffering in effect considerable reproductive costs. Given that men vary in their qualities, at every point in time there should be several men who find themselves

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in the unfavorable position of lacking what women want. Accordingly, a forced-sex mating strategy is likely to constitute a behavioral adaptation that enables men of low mate value to circumvent female choice, and, in effect, resolves the problem of sexual access (Thornhill & Palmer, 2000).

This hypothesis has recently been questioned on the grounds that during human evolution female choice was a weak selection force because women's mate choices were controlled by their parents (Apostolou, 2012b). It has been argued instead that if a forced-sex mating strategy constitutes indeed a behavioral adaptation, it primarily evolved to circumvent parental choice. It therefore remains unclear which evolutionary forces have shaped such a mechanism. Failure to describe these forces, and thus the presence (or absence) of recurrent benefits associated with this strategy, also makes it unclear whether rape is the expression of a behavioral adaptation or a byproduct of other behavioral adaptations. The purpose of this paper is to identify these evolutionary forces and develop a comprehensive evolutionary framework that will account for the phenomenon of rape.

2. The evolutionary context of rape

An evolutionary framework needs to be applied if the ultimate causes of a behavioral mechanism are to be identified. The application of evolutionary reasoning in understanding human behavior is based on the assumption that the human mind has been shaped predominantly by evolutionary forces operating in an ancestral environment which is different from that found in Western societies (Tooby & Cosmides, 1990). Therefore, by employing anthropological and historical evidence on pre-industrial societies, we can identify the evolutionary pressures which are likely to have shaped a forced-sex mating strategy.

Parents and children have conflicting interests over mating that is, the mate choices of the former do not serve the best interest of the latter (Apostolou, 2008b; Buunk, Park, & Dubbs, 2008; Trivers, 1974). This gives the incentive to parents to place the mating decisions of their children under their control and choose as spouses for them those individuals who best serve their interests (Apostolou, 2010b). Moreover, owing to asymmetry in parental investment, with women being the scarce reproductive resource to which men strive to gain access, parents are more interested in controlling the mate choices of their daughters than of their sons (Perilloux, Fleischman, & Buss, 2008).

In the majority of pre-industrial societies, parents are successful in doing this. That is, in societies in which subsistence is based on hunting and gathering the most common mode of long-term mating is arranged marriage (Apostolou, 2007). This is also the case in societies where subsistence is based on agriculture and animal husbandry, and in both society types, daughters are controlled more than sons (Apostolou, 2010b).

This evidence indicates that strong parental control over mating has been prevalent during most of human evolution. In particular, the genus *Homo* appeared on earth approximately 2 million years ago and until about 10,000 years ago all humans were living as hunters and gatherers (Lee & Devore, 1968). The way of life of these ancestral foragers probably resembled that of their modern counterparts (Lee & Devore, 1968). Accordingly, the patterns of mating found among modern foragers such as arranged marriage are likely to have been prevalent among ancestral ones, a hypothesis that is supported also by research based on phylogenetic analysis which attempts to reconstruct the conditions in ancestral societies (Walker, Hill, Flinn, & Ellsworth, 2011).

In the same vein, the patterns of mating prevalent in contemporary agropastoral societies are likely to have been prevalent in ancestral agropastoral ones (Apostolou, 2010b). This hypothesis is corroborated by evidence from the historical record. More specifically, a study of 16 historical societies found that the prevailing patterns were of strong

parental control over the mate choices of children, particularly daughters (Apostolou, 2012a,b).

Overall, the anthropological and historical records indicate that if a forced-sex mating strategy has indeed evolved, this took place in a context where mating was regulated and sexual access to women was controlled by their parents. For a forced-sex mating strategy to be the outcome of an evolved psychological mechanism, it must have recurrently generated reproductive benefits for the ancestral men who followed it (McKibbin, Shackelford, Goetz, & Starratt, 2008). Therefore, the next step is to identify the benefits of this strategy in the context of human evolution.

3. The evolution of rape

3.1. Circumventing parental choice

When they look for sons-in-law, parents are after men who are endowed with qualities which are beneficial for them. Evidence from contemporary and historical societies indicates that parents are interested in finding sons-in-law who have a high resource-generating capacity, come from good families, control wealth, and have a good character (Apostolou, 2010a, 2012a,b; Borgerhoff Mulder, 1988; Koster, 2011). Men who lack desirable qualities such as social status and find themselves in a context where mating is regulated, suffer a considerable reproductive disadvantage as they are likely to be excluded from mating or have to settle for women of a low mate value.

In more detail, parents with daughters of high mate value (e.g., attractive and young) are not going to be willing to give them as wives to men of lower mate value (i.e., men who lack desirable traits). Accordingly, if a man of low mate value aspires to meet parental approval, he needs to address parents whose daughters also have a low mate value (i.e., are older, unattractive, have children from previous marriages, etc.), and who are thus more willing to accept him as a son-in-law. In effect, this man will suffer considerable fitness losses as he will have to settle for a woman of low mate value or opt out from the reproductive process.

There are two related factors working with parental choice which act to reduce low mate value men's ability to attract desirable wives. One is polygyny, which is practiced in the majority of pre-industrial societies and acts to exclude low status men from obtaining reproductive access (Blood, 1972). The reason is that high mate value men are able to attract multiple wives, leaving those at the bottom of the hierarchy single. In the same vein, hypergyny, that is, women marrying up the social hierarchy, a common finding in many societies, pulls women out of the lower classes, leaving many low-status men without wives (Boone, 1986).

In this context, then, a forced-sex mating strategy can reduce the reproductive costs that a man is likely to suffer by circumventing parental choice, giving sexual access to women of high mate value, women that these men could not have accessed otherwise. This predicts that rapists are predominantly young men of low mate value, which appears to be so (Thornhill & Palmer, 2000; Thornhill & Thornhill, 1983). This predicts further that the victims of rape should predominantly be high mate value women that these rapists could not have accessed otherwise. Consistent with this prediction, the majority of rape victims are usually young women at the peak of their fertility (Greenfield, 1997; Kilpatrick, Edmunds, & Seymour, 1992; Thornhill & Palmer, 2000).

Parents prefer as in-laws individuals who have a high resource acquisition capacity and control wealth (Apostolou, 2010a; Borgerhoff Mulder, 1988). Accordingly, when they find themselves with a daughter of high mate value, they demand a high bridewealth (i.e., the wealth that the man has to pay for the marriage to proceed) to ensure that their prospective son-in-law satisfies these properties (Apostolou, 2008a). To get these resources a man relies on the support of his family (Goody & Tambiah, 1973). Moreover, a man's

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