



## The evolutionary psychology of human mating: A response to Buller's critique



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### ABSTRACT

In this paper, I critique arguments made by philosopher David Buller against central evolutionary-psychological explanations of human mating. Specifically, I aim to rebut his criticisms of Evolutionary Psychology regarding (1) women's long-term mating preferences for high-status men; (2) the evolutionary rationale behind men's provisioning of women; (3) men's mating preferences for young women; (4) women's adaptation for extra-pair sex; (5) the sex-differentiated evolutionary theory of human jealousy; and (6) the notion of mate value. In sum, I aim to demonstrate that Buller's arguments contra Evolutionary Psychologists are left wanting.

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### 1. Introduction

Philosopher David Buller's (2005a) book *Adapting Minds* has been influential in framing much of the discussion of evolutionary psychology in philosophy of biology circles and beyond. Though the first part of Buller's book is oriented as a critique of the theoretical basis of what he dubs (upper-case) "Evolutionary Psychology",<sup>1</sup> the second part proceeds to mount a rather radical critique of paradigmatic work in its larger empirical research program. Unlike some philosophical critics of Evolutionary Psychology (e.g., Fodor, 2000; Richardson, 2007) who find an adaptationist approach to human psychology to be fundamentally problematic, Buller, by contrast, avers that despite his all-out critical attack, he is nonetheless "unabashedly enthusiastic about efforts to apply evolutionary theory to human psychology" (Buller, 2005a, p. x).

With respect to mating in particular, Buller's critique of work by Evolutionary Psychologists is followed by his own alternative

explanations. Therefore, the differences between Buller and Evolutionary Psychologists on this front more or less amount to competing hypotheses, and hence can be evaluated accordingly. The focus of the present paper will be to present and then rebut a number of Buller's key criticisms of empirical work in Evolutionary Psychology. My chief aim will be to demonstrate that Buller's alternative explanations are ultimately weaker than the ones on offer in the Evolutionary Psychology research program that he criticizes. The hope is that by broadly rebutting Buller's response to Evolutionary Psychologists' work on mating and highlighting some of the responses to him by others (e.g., Buss & Haselton, 2005; Delton, Robertson, & Kenrick, 2006), philosophers who originally found his criticisms cogent, and that are not particularly conversant in the relevant empirical literature on mating, may reassess the strength of those criticisms. Two of the general shortcomings of Buller's alternatives appear to be the result of having misrepresented key aspects of the hypotheses he criticizes, and of omitting crucial empirical evidence, in some cases of the sort that speaks against his proffered alternatives. In addition, and in terms of comparative theory assessment more generally, there is also some empirical evidence that has emerged since Buller's book was published that speaks in favor of the

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<sup>1</sup> For the purposes of this paper, I adopt the terminological distinction between (upper-case) "Evolutionary Psychology" and (lower-case) evolutionary psychology. The upper-case nomenclature (Evolutionary Psychology) refers to the overarching research program targeted by Buller.

prominent views held by Evolutionary Psychologists and against Buller's alternatives.

The structure of the paper is as follows. I aim to rebut Buller's criticisms of Evolutionary Psychology regarding (1) women's long-term mating preferences for high-status men; (2) the evolutionary rationale behind men's provisioning of women; (3) men's mating preferences for young women; (4) women's adaptation for extra-pair sex; (5) the sex-differentiated evolutionary theory of human jealousy; and (6) the notion of mate value. To this end, I critically examine Buller's arguments against (1) and present crucial evidence from within Evolutionary Psychology which contradicts his alternative explanation; marshal evidence that undercuts his criticisms of (2) and instead offer a hybrid view; argue that his arguments against (3) are also belied by available evidence, and, where they purport to advance explanatory addenda, add virtually nothing of explanatory value not already provided by theoretical and empirical work within Evolutionary Psychology; address his criticisms of (4); argue that his account contra (5) misconstrues the focal hypotheses and overlooks relevant evidence bearing on its epistemic status; and finally discuss various considerations that undercut his criticism of (6). In sum, I aim to demonstrate that Buller's arguments contra Evolutionary Psychologists miss the mark.

## 2. Women's long-term mating preferences for men with high-status

Central to Buller's (2005a, pp. 228–244) argument against the view proffered by Evolutionary Psychologists that women have an evolved preference for high-status men is that the evidence for such a view is illusory. Moreover, Buller alleges that the data presented by Evolutionary Psychologists is instead better explained by the alternative process of homogamy (roughly, individuals with comparable traits mating with one another). Before appraising Buller's argument, however, a clarification on the concept of status is in order. Status, as typically operationalized by Evolutionary Psychologists and others, is comprised of both *dominance* and *socioeconomic status* (SES). For present purposes, I confine my analysis to the socioeconomic component of status (SES), which can roughly be defined as an individual's income and occupational prestige.

In his assessment of a number of empirical studies adduced by Evolutionary Psychologists in support of the view that women prefer long-term mates with high SES, Buller (2005a) contends that:

given the composition of the subject groups in these experiments, none of the experiments can distinguish whether female respondents were indicating a genuine preference for a mate with high SES or whether their ratings were a product of simple assortative mating by status. (p. 237)

According to Buller, given that the samples of such studies were biased by dint of the fact that they were variously comprised of middle-, upper middle-, and upper-class women, their empirical results can be alternatively interpreted as arising from preferences for homogamy. Though Buller does affirm that there is indeed a sex-difference in the income level that men and women prefer in a long-term partner (as well as in other relationship types), he argues that it obfuscates the real causal process undergirding it, which he contends is assortative mating. Buller also agrees with the assertions of Evolutionary Psychologists such as Kenrick and Keefe (1992) that men and women seemingly have preferences for assortatively mating with respect to certain characteristics, such as "similar expectations, values, activity levels, and habits" (Kenrick & Keefe, 1992, p. 85). At the same time, however, he argues that the sex difference in stated preferences for income in a partner is symptomatic of the average income differential between men and

women in American society, where most if not all of the studies in question were conducted. In addition, Buller contends that income is a much better predictor of other facets of social status in men than it is in women, given the various disparities in income between the sexes. Thus, according to Buller, in order to accurately use income as a proxy for assortatively mating with respect to social status (as well as other characteristics), women must prefer men with income levels above theirs in order to correct for the above mentioned disparities.

In light of all this, some testable predictions of Buller's alternative hypothesis can be derived. On the one hand, according to Buller's homogamy hypothesis, women of medium SES should be expected to prefer, for example, long-term mates of either equal or greater SES. But crucially, any preference for a long-term mate with higher SES cannot greatly exceed the woman's own SES, as such a preference would defeat the aim of mating in accordance with homogamy. In other words, women of medium SES should find men that, relative to them, are lower in SES to be unattractive as long-term partners, and by contrast, should find men of SES above them as attractive, but only up to a point. Buller's alternative hypothesis would therefore predict a threshold, such that women of medium SES no longer find men attractive as long-term partners once such men reach an SES level that (adjusted perhaps for income inequality) sufficiently outstrips theirs, and all else being equal. An empirical finding published well in advance of Buller's book, however, falsifies this prediction. In a study comprised of undergraduate students predominantly of medium and upper-medium SES, Kenrick, Sundie, Nicastle, and Stone (2001) found that the ratings given by women of a man's desirability as a marriage partner rose in proportion to his income level. That is, as a given man's income level increased, so too did his attractiveness as a marriage partner, which should *not* be the case if Buller's alternative hypothesis is correct, the latter of which, again, holds that women prefer to mate assortatively by status. According to the results of Kenrick et al. (2001), a man making \$1-million annually was no less attractive as a marriage prospect as one making \$200-thousand annually. According to Buller's alternative hypothesis, we should expect that the women in this study, having been drawn mainly from medium and upper-medium SES, should rate men earning in excess of, say, \$150-thousand or more annually as less attractive as marriage prospects than men with incomes much closer to the annual incomes of the women involved in the actual study. Yet this was not the case.

There is also a second prediction which can be teased out of Buller's alternative hypothesis, and it too has already been falsified empirically, also well before the publication of his book. According to Buller's homogamy hypothesis, as both men and women move up the SES ladder, both sexes should perceive their pool of acceptable mates diminishing, since the higher one moves up the SES ladder, the smaller the amount of SES-matched potential partners there generally will be. Contrary to this derived prediction, however, Townsend (1989) found a notable sex-difference when he asked both male and female medical students whether they observed their pool of potential marriage partners diminishing or expanding. In that study, 85% of women reported their pool of suitable marriage partners diminishing as they advanced in their career (which is also consistent with the view that there are lower absolute numbers of individuals at higher levels of SES relative to medium or lower levels). Crucially, however, 90% of men, by contrast, saw their pool of suitable marriage partners increasing. These results indicate that men felt that their own career advancement—and with it, higher SES—increased their mate value, and hence yielded a concomitant increase in their pool of potential mates. This asymmetric result between what women subjects stated on the one hand, and what men subjects stated on the other, should not have been the case according to Buller's alternative

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