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chapter sixteen

Evolutionary Psychological Perspectives on Men's Partner-Directed Violence

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KEY TERMS

Cuckoldry

Evolutionary psychology

Intimate partner

violence

Jealousy

Paternity uncertainty

INTRODUCTION

Approximately one in five reported incidents of nonfatal violence against women are perpetrated by an intimate partner. This amounts to nearly 600,000 reported incidents of nonfatal violence against women by an intimate partner in just a single year in the United States. Partly in response to the tragically high incidence of female-directed violence in intimate relationships and the devastating negative physical and psychological consequences of these behaviors, a large body of literature has investigated the predictors of men's violence against intimate partners. Previous research has identified several proximate predictors of men's partner-directed violence, such as family history of aggression and cultural influences, as well as ultimate or evolutionary predictors of such costly behaviors, notably male sexual jealousy as a solution to the adaptive problem of **paternity uncertainty**.¹

Increasingly over the past several decades, social scientists have recognized the value of an evolutionary perspective for guiding their research. Evolutionary psychological

theories have been applied successfully to the investigation of diverse human behaviors, including altruism and cooperation, conflict and violence, decision making, interpersonal relationships, and mating.² **Evolutionary psychology** is concerned with identifying and describing the design and function of psychological adaptations that evolved to solve the specific problems our ancestors faced recurrently over human evolutionary history. These evolved mechanisms are information-processing devices that motivate behavior in response to particular environmental inputs. An evolutionary psychological perspective can guide research on **intimate partner violence**, notably research on the evolved mechanisms that motivate these behaviors. This chapter reviews different forms of men's partner-directed violence, including insults, sexual coercion, physical violence, and homicide, from an evolutionary psychological perspective.

PATERNITY UNCERTAINTY AND MALE SEXUAL JEALOUSY

Over human evolutionary history, men and women have faced the adaptive problems of maintaining relationships and retaining intimate partners. **Jealousy** is an emotion that motivates behaviors that deter mate-poaching rivals and prevents partner infidelity or outright desertion from the relationship. Men and women do not differ in the frequency or intensity with which they experience jealousy. However, men and women respond differently to two different types of partner infidelity: emotional infidelity and sexual infidelity. Men are more distressed about a partner's sexual infidelity than about her emotional infidelity, whereas the opposite pattern is found for women. This sex difference has been documented in more than a dozen empirical studies using various methods, including forced-choice self-report assessments, physiological assessments, experimental methods, and archival and cross-cultural data.³

The sex difference in the experience of jealousy may be attributable to sex-specific adaptive problems humans faced over our evolutionary history. It is hypothesized that ancestral women faced the recurrent problems of paternal investment and acquisition and retention of resources with which to raise offspring. A partner's emotional infidelity might have predicted his current or future investment of resources in another woman and another woman's children. Ancestral men, in contrast, faced the adaptive problem of paternity uncertainty. Female sexual infidelity and subsequent **cuckoldry**—her regular partner's unwitting investment in offspring to whom he is not genetically related—carried substantial reproductive costs for ancestral men. The reproductive costs of cuckoldry, including the loss of time, energy, resources, and alternative mating opportunities, are potentially so great that men have evolved to be sensitive to and to experience more distress about a partner's sexual infidelity. Men also may have evolved mechanisms that assess the risk of partner sexual infidelity and mechanisms that motivate the performance of anticuckoldry tactics. To assess the likelihood or risk of partner sexual infidelity, these information-processing mechanisms may use cues such as greater time spent apart from the partner, the presence of potential rivals, and a partner's attractiveness, or her "mate value" as a short-term or long-term partner.⁴ The behavioral output of male sexual jealousy varies from subtle nonviolent mate retention behaviors to outright physical violence.

MALE SEXUAL JEALOUSY AND MATE RETENTION BEHAVIORS

One class of behavioral output of sexual jealousy is men's mate retention behaviors, which are designed to prevent a partner's infidelity or outright relationship defection, or to thwart attempts to encroach on the relationship by rivals. Buss developed a taxonomy of mate retention behaviors organized into five categories: acts of direct guarding function to keep a partner under surveillance; acts of intersexual negative inducements, which include threats to punish a partner's infidelity; acts of positive inducements, which include expressions of affection and care; acts of public signals of possession, which include acts intended to signal possession of a partner to potential rivals; and acts of intrasexual negative inducements, which include acts intended to threaten potential rivals and thereby deter them from encroaching on the relationship. As the risk of female infidelity increases, men perform more frequent mate retention behaviors. For example, Buss and Shackelford found that men mated to younger, more attractive partners (cues to reproductive value or expected future reproduction) and men who perceive greater probability of partner infidelity guard their partners more intensely. Also, men perform more frequent mate retention behaviors when they are mated to women who possess qualities that predict her infidelity, including her personality characteristics such as surgency and openness to experience. Because time spent physically apart from a partner increases the risk of a partner's infidelity, men who have spent a greater proportion of time apart from their partners also report engaging in more frequent mate retention behaviors. In addition, McKibbin et al. identified positive relationships between men's accusations of their partner's infidelity and the frequency with which they performed several categories of mate retention.⁵

A more physically damaging output of male sexual jealousy is partner-directed violence. Male sexual jealousy is one of the most frequently cited causes of men's partner-directed violence, both physical and sexual.⁶ The frequency with which men perform nonviolent mate retention behaviors predicts the frequency with which they inflict physical violence against their partners, because both classes of behavior are hypothesized to be outputs of sexual jealousy. In three studies Shackelford et al. investigated the relationship between men's nonviolent mate retention behaviors and men's partner-directed violence. Based on men's self-reports, women's partner reports, and cross-spouse reports, men's use of emotional manipulation as a mate retention tactic—marked by the performance of acts such as, “I told my partner I would ‘die’ if she ever left me”—predicted female-directed violence. Men's monopolization of their partner's time and men's sexual inducements also predicted men's physical violence against their partners.⁷ Because suspicions of partner infidelity predict men's mate retention behaviors and because men's mate retention behaviors predict men's partner-directed violence, Kaighobadi, Starratt, Popp, and Shackelford hypothesized that men's suspicions of their partner's infidelity is linked directly to partner-directed violence. In two studies, using men's self-reports and women's partner reports, Kaighobadi et al. found that men's accusations of their partner's infidelity predict men's partner-directed violence. Moreover, this relationship is mediated by nonviolent mate retention behaviors. Kaighobadi et al. hypothesized that men perform nonviolent and violent mate retention behaviors in a temporal hierarchical fashion. Less severe, less costly behaviors might be deployed first, followed by more severe behaviors such that the hierarchy of events leading to

female-directed violence is initiated with men's suspicions of partner infidelity followed by nonviolent mate retention behaviors and ending in acts of physical violence.⁸

Puente and Cohen conducted a series of studies investigating third-party observer perceptions of male sexual jealousy and female-directed violence. They found that observers were more accepting of violent behavior in scenarios in which intimate partner violence followed the male aggressor's experience of sexual jealousy. When the male aggressor was described as sexually jealous, observers were less inclined to convict him of a crime and assumed that the female victim also would be less inclined to file charges against her partner. Puente and Cohen also found that jealous abusers were perceived by observers as more romantically in love with their partner than nonjealous abusers. It therefore appears that people readily and intuitively render judgments and reach conclusions based on an expected relationship between men's jealousy and men's partner-directed violence. A third-party observer's ready inference of a relationship between male sexual jealousy and men's partner-directed violence is consistent with the operation of an implicit mechanism underlying these judgments.⁹

RISK OF SPERM COMPETITION AND SEXUAL COERCION

Sexual coercion or rape of an intimate partner also is a hypothesized manifestation of male sexual jealousy, which may be a response to perceived risk of sperm competition. Between 10 and 26 percent of women report being raped by their husband. In a sample of young adults in a committed, sexual relationship, Goetz and Shackelford found that 7.3 percent of men admitted to at least one incidence of raping their current partner, and that 9.1 percent of women reported having experienced at least one incidence of rape by their current partner.¹⁰

Many studies have investigated men's sexual coercion in an intimate relationship. A number of hypotheses have been formulated to test the proximate or immediate predictors of men's sexual coercion of an intimate partner and also the ultimate or evolutionary predictors of men's sexual coercion of an intimate partner. Several scholars have argued that men's sexual coercion of their partner is motivated by a desire to dominate and control their partners.¹¹ For example, several studies have found that men that are physically abusive of their partners also are more likely to be sexually coercive toward their partners than are men who are not physically abusive.¹² Shackelford and Goetz also found a positive relationship between men's nonviolent controlling behavior and men's sexual coercion of their partners. Gage and Hutchinson found that women's experience of sexual coercion by their partner is predicted by their partner's jealousy and nonviolent controlling behavior but is not predicted by differences in social power between the partners.

The desire to dominate and control a partner may explain some portion of the individual differences in men's sexually coercive behaviors, but the proponents of the domination and control hypothesis argue that men *as a group* are motivated to exert "patriarchal terrorism" or "patriarchal power" over all women through sexual coercion of their own partners.¹³ We are unaware of research that has empirically tested these hypotheses. It should be noted, however, that hypotheses that propose coordinated male-male cooperation to dominate and control women are not consistent with substantial theoretical and empirical

work that highlights the frequency and intensity of male–male competition (rather than cooperation) for attracting women as intimate partners.¹⁴

Sexual coercion also is hypothesized to function as an anticuckoldry tactic.¹⁵ It has been hypothesized that by forcing their partners to have sex, men who are suspicious of their partner's infidelity introduce their own sperm into their partner's reproductive tract and thereby decrease the risk of cuckoldry. This sperm competition hypothesis for partner rape has been applied to nonhumans (notably, several avian species) to account for observations of partner rape immediately after female extra-pair copulations. Rape of an intimate partner in humans also often follows accusations of female sexual infidelity.

Thornhill and Thornhill argued that women who resist or avoid copulating with their partners might thereby be signaling to their partners a recent sexual infidelity; hence, forced copulation might function to decrease men's paternity uncertainty. The fact that rape of a woman is more likely to occur during or after a breakup (when men's concerns about her infidelities are greatest) may provide preliminary support for this hypothesis. A number of studies have documented a positive relationship between men's sexual jealousy and men's sexual coercion of their partners. For example, men who sexually coerced their wives are more sexually jealous than men who did not. Previous research has found a direct positive relationship between men's suspicions and accusations of partner infidelity and men's sexual coercion of their partners.¹⁶

In two studies securing data from men's self-reports and women's partner-reports, Goetz and Shackelford found that men's sexual coercion correlated positively with women's past and future likelihood of engaging in sexual infidelity. They also found that men who perform more mate retention behaviors also are more likely to perform sexually coercive behaviors against their partners, as reported by men and by their partners. The domination and control hypothesis and the sperm competition hypothesis reflect different levels of analysis. The domination and control hypothesis offers a proximate explanation of partner sexual coercion, including social or cultural causes of behavior. The sperm competition hypothesis offers an ultimate explanation of partner sexual coercion and addresses how adaptations that produce such costly behaviors could have evolved. Goetz and Shackelford do not argue that all sexually coercive behaviors are produced by evolved mechanisms that motivate anticuckoldry behaviors. Instead, they attempted to explain the increased likelihood of sexual coercion in the context of risk of female infidelity. It may be that some instances of sexual coercion are the result of, for example, an antisocial man's motivation to control, dominate, or humiliate his partner. Future research can investigate the interaction of individual differences in men's perpetration of sexual coercion and evolutionarily relevant contexts such as the risk of female infidelity and sperm competition to predict men's sexual coercion and rape of their partners.

INTIMATE PARTNER HOMICIDE

According to the U.S. Department of Justice, between 1976 and 2005, 30 percent of female homicide victims were killed by an intimate partner, making it the largest class of victim–offender relationship. In sharp contrast, just 5 percent of all male homicide victims

were killed by an intimate partner. In most categories of intimate partner homicide, men far outnumber women as the perpetrator and women far outnumber men as the victim.¹⁷ Several hypotheses have been advanced to explain the occurrence and frequency of intimate partner homicide, and here we review briefly these hypotheses, with reference to intimate partner homicide of women by men. According to one hypothesis, sheer proximity might account for the frequency of intimate partner homicide. Because intimate partners frequently engage in interactions with one another, partner killing might occur as an extreme manifestation of interpersonal conflict. According to a second hypothesis, the “killing-as-a-byproduct” hypothesis, because killing a partner carries substantial and severe costs that might not have consistently produced sufficient benefits over human evolutionary history, it is unlikely to be the product of specialized adaptations. The costs associated with killing a partner include the risk of retaliation by the victim’s kin and the local community; the loss of time, energy, and resources a man invested in maintaining the relationship; and the loss of maternal investment in any shared offspring. Instead, partner killing might be a byproduct of other male psychological adaptations, including adaptations specialized to motivate nonlethal punishment of a partner’s suspected or actual infidelity and to control her sexual interactions. Wilson and Daly argue that men’s “sexual proprietariness” is a key cause of 80 percent of spousal homicides and define sexual proprietariness as a combination of sexual jealousy and men’s “presumptions of entitlement” and motivation to control their partner’s sexual behavior. Other factors also affect rates of violence and homicide of female partners, including the age of the woman and the presence of a woman’s children from previous relationships.¹⁸

Proponents of a third hypothesis for intimate partner homicide argue that the byproduct hypothesis cannot explain the large incidence of apparently premeditated partner homicides. Premeditated homicides include hiring someone to kill the partner, aiming at and shooting a partner, or deliberately poisoning a partner. Buss and Duntley argue that partner killing by men might be the designed outcome of a specialized adaptation in the context of suspected or actual female infidelity (and, as a consequence, paternity uncertainty). This “evolved homicide module” hypothesis does not imply that discovery of female sexual infidelity will always or even frequently lead to partner killing by men, but instead that the relevant evolved mechanisms are likely to be activated with suspicions of female partner infidelity and may very occasionally result in partner killing.¹⁹

CONCLUSION

Evolutionary psychologists are interested in identifying the ultimate (or distal) explanations for a trait or behavior. Intimate partner violence and homicide are costly behaviors, for both the victim and the perpetrator. It is useful to consider an evolutionary perspective to investigate properly the design features and evolved function of the psychological mechanisms that motivate these behaviors. An evolutionary psychological perspective can guide identification of the contexts that trigger the relevant information-processing mechanisms and motivate the subsequent behaviors. Many instances of intimate partner violence and homicide co-occur with and may be triggered by men’s suspicions or knowledge of their female partner’s

sexual infidelity. However, this does not mean that individual men never perpetrate violence for other reasons, such as to gain control and dominance over their partners.

Moreover, previous research identified several proximate correlates of female-directed violence, such as a family history of aggression and acceptance of local cultural norms. Previous research also investigated men's personality traits as predictors of men's partner-directed violence. For example, Hellmuth and McNulty documented that more neurotic men are more likely to inflict violence on their partners, especially if the men suffer from chronic stress.²⁰ Situational factors including the characteristics of the perpetrator, the victim, and the circumstances in which the violence occurs also have been considered in research investigating intimate partner violence and homicide. For example, the perpetrator's age and the victim's age, the perpetrator's mental health, and the availability of weapons have been investigated as situational factors predicting intimate partner violence.²¹

In conclusion, it is important to investigate both the proximate and ultimate causes of intimate partner violence. The relevant evolved psychological mechanisms interact with stable dispositions and situational factors to produce manifest behavior. Future research might benefit by taking an evolutionary perspective to build models of intimate partner violence that include both stable dispositions such as personality traits and environmental factors such as a family history of aggression. To achieve a fuller understanding of intimate partner violence and homicide, researchers must include a careful consideration of the evolved psychological mechanisms that motivate these costly behaviors.

GLOSSARY

Cuckoldry—males raising children who they believe are biologically their own but who are really the biological offspring of another mate

Evolutionary psychology—a perspective that is concerned with identifying and describing the design and function of psychological adaptations that evolved to solve the specific problems our ancestors faced recurrently over human evolutionary history

Intimate partner violence—violence that occurs between mates

Jealousy—an emotion that generates feelings of envy and that has been linked to behaviors that deter mate-poaching rivals and prevents partner infidelity or outright desertion from the relationship

Paternity uncertainty—refers to the fact that males are never 100 percent certain that the child their mate bears is really theirs

NOTES

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