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Moral Foundations Predict Mating Preferences in Men and Women

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Buss and Schmitt (1993) proposed that there are evolutionary-based differences in male/female mating preferences. According to Sexual Strategies Theory, men and women differ in the amount of parental investment required of them. This difference leads men to be more likely than women to pursue short-term mating strategies. Women, on the other hand, are more likely to pursue long-term mating strategies where the quantity and quality of resources their mate brings to them and their offspring are key.

Sex-difference generalizations are not the only psychological differences rooted in evolutionary psychology. Graham, Nosek, Haidt, Iyer, Koleva, and Ditto (2011) outline five psychological foundations of morality—care/harm, fairness/reciprocity, in-group loyalty, authority/respect, and purity/sanctity—that they posit have an evolved origin. The foundations are modifiable, however, and can vary across culture or even sub-culture. Graham et al. also report sex differences on some of the foundations, with women scoring higher than men on care, fairness, and purity.

The present research examines the relationship between sexual attitudes and moral foundations, and specifically addresses possible sex differences in the relationships between those constructs.

Method

Participants and Procedure

Participants were 113 women and 49 men (mean age of 19) from a Midwest liberal arts college who received credit in an introduction to psychology course for taking part in the study.

As part of a larger study which contained other measures, participants completed a series of questions based on the research presented by Buss and Schmitt (1993). Among these questions were questions asking 1) how many sexual partners subjects wanted over periods of time ranging from the next month through their lifetime, and 2) how likely they would be to have intercourse with a desirable person whom they had known for time periods ranging from 5 years to 1 hour. In order to encourage candor in responses to such a personal topic, we assured participants both verbally and in the informed consent that their responses would be anonymous. To further assure participants of anonymity, participants were instructed to place their completed packets in a large box with a slit in the top to prevent researchers from being able to identify which packet belonged to any given participant.

When they were done with the first series of questionnaires, participants were given the MFQ30 (Moral Foundations Questionnaire; Graham, Haidt, & Nosek, 2009), which has two sections that tap participants' positions on 5 moral foundations: care, fairness, in-group loyalty, authority, and purity. Participants were asked to decide the extent that certain considerations (e.g., whether or not someone suffered emotionally) were relevant to their thinking about whether certain behaviors were right or wrong. The second section asked participants to indicate their agreement or disagreement (0 = strongly disagree, 6=strongly agree) with several sentences (e.g., "Compassion for those who are suffering is the most crucial virtue").

Results

A principal components analysis conducted on a previous and larger data set with the sexual attitudes scale revealed two clear factors—number of sexual partners desired in the next month, 6 months, and year (*partners wanted in short term*) and partners wanted in the next 3, 4, 5, 10, 20, and 30 years and lifetime (*partners wanted in long term*). Another principal components analysis conducted on the willingness to have sex after having known a partner for a period of time also revealed two clear factors—

willingness to have intercourse after having known for one month or less (*known short time*) and willingness after having known 3 months or longer (*known long time*).

Sex Differences on Sexual Strategies

Males reported wanting more sexual partners than females in both the short-term and the long term (see Table 1). Men were also more willing than were women to have intercourse after having known a partner in both the short-term and the long term.

Sex Differences on Moral Foundations

There were no differences between men and women on the fairness, in-group, and authority foundations (see Table 1). Women scored higher than men on both the care and the purity moral foundations.

Relationship Between Moral Foundations and Sexual Attitudes

Correlation coefficients (see Table 2) revealed that purity scores were negatively related to 3 of 4 mating desire variables for women (partners desired in short and long term, and willingness to have intercourse in the long term), and two for men (willingness to have intercourse in the short term and long term). For men, however, number of partners in short and long term and willingness to have intercourse in short term were negatively correlated with authority foundation scores at levels approaching traditional significance (all p 's < .07).

Discussion

Consistent with past research (e.g., Buss & Schmitt, 1993; Schmitt et al., 2003) men reported wanting more sexual partners than did women, and showed a greater willingness to engage in intercourse sooner after having met a potential mate. Also consistent with past research (e.g., Graham et al., 2011), female subjects were higher than males in purity and care foundation scores, though women were not higher on the fairness foundation.

Not surprisingly, for both men and women the purity foundation—which is related to values such as chastity, doing what God wants, and decency—was negatively related to willingness to have intercourse. Only for women, however, was purity negatively related to desired number of sexual partners. Furthermore, only for men did the authority foundation, which taps duty and respect for authority and tradition, relate (negatively) to sexual behavior attitudes. Men were not higher in this foundation than women, but it appears that authority is more relevant to men in informing their sexual values.

This study provides preliminary evidence that sexual behavior attitudes are related to moral foundations, and that that relationship may differ somewhat between men and women.

References

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Table 1 Means and Standard Deviations for Men and Women on Moral Foundations and Mating Desire Variables

	<u>Men (n=49)</u>		<u>Women (n=113)</u>		<i>t</i>	<i>d</i>
	<u>Mean_s</u>	<u>St. Dev.</u>	<u>Mean</u>	<u>St. Dev.</u>		
<u>Moral Foundation</u>						
Care/Harm	20.2	4.1	22.7	3.3	4.1**	.65
Fairness	20.7	4.1	21.8	3.8	1.65	--
In-Group	17.9	4.6	17.7	4.9	.26	--
Authority	17.6	5.1	18.2	4.3	.86	--
Purity	14.3	6.7	17.0	5.2	2.72*	.43
<u>Partners Desired</u>						
Short-Term	1.76	1.56	.64	.68	6.36**	1.01
Long-Term	5.75	5.78	1.93	1.80	6.38**	1.01
<u>Sexual Willingness</u>						
Known Short-Time	-.79	1.87	-2.50	.89	7.90**	1.25
Known Long-Time	1.87	1.43	.61	1.77	4.38**	.69

Note: Moral foundations scores have a possible range of 0-30. Sexual willingness scores have a possible range of -3 to 3. * $p < .01$ ** $p < .001$

Table 2
Zero-Order Correlations Between Moral Foundations and Mating Desire Variables for Women and Men

<u>Moral Foundation</u>	<u>Number Partners Desired Short Term</u>		<u>Number Partners Desired Long Term</u>		<u>Willingness to Have Intercourse Known Short Time</u>		<u>Willingness to Have Intercourse Known Long Time</u>	
	<u>Women</u>	<u>Men</u>	<u>Women</u>	<u>Men</u>	<u>Women</u>	<u>Men</u>	<u>Women</u>	<u>Men</u>
	<u>Care/Harm</u>	-.04	.03	.09	-.02	-.28*	.09	-.08
<u>Fairness</u>	-.16	.09	-.04	.11	-.11	.14	-.03	-.03
<u>In-Group</u>	.01	.18	-.08	-.03	.15	-.01	-.19	-.10
<u>Authority</u>	-.11	-.36*	-.05	-.34 [†]	.13	-.27	-.11	-.34 [†]
<u>Purity</u>	-.42***	-.22	-.24*	-.19	-.15	-.41*	-.50***	-.58***

Note: [†] $p < .07$ * $p < .05$ ** $p < .01$ *** $p < .001$;
All correlation coefficients adjust for unreliability of measures.