Sexual Conflict After Conception

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The Adaptive Function of Marital Dissatisfaction During Child-Rearing

It can be argued that the dissatisfaction that occurs in a marriage serves an adaptive function (Shackelford and Buss 1997). Pair-bonding among humans, in particular a union of marriage, likely evolved to increase the reproductive benefits for both sexes (Betzig 1989; Buss and Schmitt 1993). If a marriage is not maximizing the potential benefits and the costs that incur from the relationship outweigh the benefits, then the dissatisfaction that arises would serve to bring awareness of the issues that occur in the marriage. If a couple decides that a relationship is no longer beneficial, then the negative emotions associated with this dissatisfaction would cause one or both of the individuals involved to either address the problems or to end the current relationship to find a more beneficial partnership.

The adaptive challenges for both sexes during a union following conception would have been mate retention and the care of offspring. Since men and women have different reproductive strategies (Buss 1989a), those differences in selective pressure would also lead to men and women facing different adaptive problems during a marriage. A major sex-specific conflict that can arise centers around the issue of paternity certainty. Evolutionary psychologists point out that worldwide cuckoldry rates range from 1.7% to 29.8% (Anderson 2006; Shackelford and Goetz 2007). Additional related conflicts such as violence, decrease in intercourse frequency, kin resemblance, the 4-year itch, and infidelity may also arise after conception.

Research by Lucas et al. (2008) suggests some cultural and evolutionary components to marital satisfaction in general. This research reveals that there may be some universal component to effective communication skills when it comes to raising an offspring, which would have been adaptive in order to successfully raise a child. This theory is further extended by Cox et al. (1999), who found that those couples who had at least one partner with positive problem-solving skills prenatally had higher marital satisfaction than those couples in which neither partner showed this set of skills. Those couples with better problem-solving skills also reported less of a drop in how satisfied they were after the child was born.

Violence During Pregnancy

Violence during pregnancy has been seen throughout history, often being viewed as a product of a patriarchal society. However,
evolutionary psychologists view violence during pregnancy as a product of male sexual jealousy stemming from anxiety that the child their partner is carrying is not theirs (Deacy and McHardy 2013). Since men do not have paternity certainty, they may resort to violence against their partner. For women, there is certainty of paternity because fertilization is internal, and women carry the child. Men, however, can be cuckolded and wind up contributing resources to a child who is his genetic offspring.

Cuckoldry ultimately decreases a man’s fitness and increases another man’s fitness. This potential of being cuckolded is why men are often more upset if their partner commits sexual infidelity rather than emotional infidelity (Kuhle 2011). Upon discovering that a man’s partner has become pregnant by someone else, the said man may direct violence against his partner to kill the developing offspring (Friedman and Shackelford 1999 as cited in Buss and Duntley 2011).

Given this risk intimate partner violence is twice as likely in response (Burch and Gallup 2004), and the prevalence of intimate partner violence during pregnancy ranges from 1% to 20% (Gazmararian et al. 1996). Cross-culturally, this statistics holds true also. A South African study indicates that at least 20% of women experience at least one act of physical violence during their pregnancy (Groves et al. 2015). Additionally, women who are abused are more likely to be pregnant with another man’s child (Martin et al. 2004). Similarly, longitudinal research indicates that partner jealousy and partner suspicion of infidelity are strongly correlated with intimate partner violence (IPV) (Hellmuth et al. 2013). These findings clearly show that abuse during pregnancy can be attributed in part to a man’s suspicion of infidelity on the part of his partner.

From this previous research, one may reason that IPV could be seen as a form of infanticide also. While abuse may seem to be directed toward the woman herself, a Nicaraguan study indicates half of the women who were pregnant and subjected to violence were injured from attacks directed to their abdomen (Valladares et al. 2005). The abdomen may be targeted in an attempt to kill the offspring, thus terminating the pregnancy.

Prior research indicates that when a man has sex with a spouse, he establishes sexual precedence over her giving him access to her future sexuality (Shotland and Goodstein 1992). This also happens when a man impregnates a spouse (Sales and Murphy 2000). This sexual precedence can be interpreted from an evolutionary perspective where it occurs to try to ensure paternity certainty and monopolize a spouse’s reproductive potential.

Male feelings of sexual precedence can also lead to abuse in the form of threats (McFarlane et al. 2002). Communicating threats to a pregnant spouse may serve as a method of mate retention designed to lower her mate value in her eyes which makes it harder for her to feel she can attract another quality mate, keeping her with the father of her offspring. McKibbin et al. (2007) indicate that men can insult their intimate partners as a form of mate retention. But, this has not been tested with men and their pregnant spouses/partners.

After Delivery: Resemblance to Kin as a Decision-Maker to Investment

Due to paternity uncertainty, men may never know if the child they are providing resources for is his genetically related offspring. But, one way a man may seek to resolve this issue is via facial resemblance between him and his offspring. Research indicates that when families observe newborn babies, both the mother and her family claim the newborn looks like the father (Daly and Wilson 1982). This represents an underlying mechanism attuned to familial resemblance of the father in order to facilitate parental investment by the father. Research supports this. Burch and Gallup (2000) report that violence directed to the child and the mother is negatively correlated with a greater sense of paternal resemblance. Also, men react in a more positive manner and invest more, hypothetically, when an offspring resembles them (Platek et al. 2002, 2003). As paternal resemblance and mate fidelity increase, so does the
increase in investment to the offspring (Apicella and Marlowe 2004). Furthermore, the area of men’s brains that play a role in decision-making respond differently to resemblance, compared to women’s brains (Platek et al. 2004). These findings suggest that facial resemblance is an important factor for paternal investment in offspring and as such suggest that kin resemblance may play a role in conflict after conception occurs.

Problems After the First Child

Four-Year Itch
Couples often have a decline in marital happiness after approximately 4 years (Fisher 1989; Kurdek 1999), and researchers have speculated that it could be the outcome of boredom in a marriage (Kurdek 1999). From an evolutionary perspective, there may be a biological drive for a new partner after 4 years because 4 years are the typical amount of time needed to ensure the survival of the hominid infant through weaning (Fisher 1989). Infants are altricial when they are born and require an extensive amount of care. Therefore, infants are mother nurses, and nursing stimulates a release of oxytocin which facilitates attachment between mother and infant (Feldman et al. 2007; Galbally et al. 2011).

Transition to Parenthood (TTP)
Prior to having their first child, the couple begins to make plans and anticipate the future with one another, and after the birth of the first child, they experience joy but also experience negative effects like an extreme focus on their health and the offspring’s health. Additionally, they experience a decline in income and an increase in labor (Myrskylä and Margolis 2014). Given this conflict, not surprisingly, when a child is born, it has negative impacts on the couple’s marital relationship (Belsky et al. 1983). In fact, Kurdek (1999) reports that couples with children experience the steepest decline in marital quality. Similarly, Twenge et al. (2003) in a meta-analysis from 148 samples report that across 90 studies parents had less marital satisfaction than non-parents, with a 10% difference among these groups in the reports of above average marital satisfaction. Research shows that married couples experience a decrease in satisfaction and confidence in their relationship and an increase in negative communication and poor conflict management (Doss et al. 2009).

From an evolutionary perspective, the decline in satisfaction due to conflict can be accounted for by selective pressures. For example, men take the role of fatherhood more negatively than women (Gray and Crittenden 2014), since men typically are more interested in short-term mating (Buss and Schmitt 1993), consistent with parental investment theory. A woman may not be as stressed with the arrival of a child because she is more interested in long-term mating (Buss and Schmitt 1993) and because she is certain that the offspring is hers, whereas men may not have paternity certainty (Trivers 1972).

In our current world, children are also weaned earlier than they were in ancestral societies which lead to more involvement in child-rearing from the father. This adds an additional stressor of an increased need for cooperation between parents to raise their young. This stressor likely contributes to fathers experiencing less marital satisfaction (Doss and Rhoades 2017).

Other moderating factors that may also contribute to increased conflict and decreased marital satisfaction are the gender of the parent, the age of offspring, and the number of offspring (Twenge et al. 2003). Correlational data indicate that women typically have less marital satisfaction than men. Furthermore, women who had infants also reported less satisfaction than women who did not have infants, while those women with infants had only a slight difference in reports of satisfaction compared to those women with older children. The age of children did not affect men’s marital satisfaction. Furthermore, those parents who had a greater number of children also revealed less marital satisfaction (Twenge et al. 2003). Overall, this research suggests that parents with multiple children and women with children have less marital satisfaction than parents with one child and childless women.

As Trivers (1972) details, there is a sex difference when it comes to parental investment.
Fertilization and gestation occur internally for females, with male’s minimal contribution to having offspring being ejaculation. After birth, women are the providers of nutrients to the child through breastfeeding, which in previous times occurred for the first 3–4 years of a child’s life. From a parental investment theory perspective, it is not surprising that women with younger children have less marital satisfaction since they have to devote greater time and effort to care for a younger child. The mothers also tend to do significantly more housework, 9 h more than those childless counterparts, while fathers only completed an hour more than those childless men (Nomaguchi and Milkie 2003). This dissatisfaction can be offset by a husband who invests more in the child by dedicating more time to the rearing of the child (Gjerdingen and Chaloner 1994).

A greater investment by a male into his offspring is something women typically look for when choosing a mate (Buss 1989a). Therefore the greater investment by a man would fulfill this preference and cause less strategic interference among the couple (Buss 1989b, 2001). Overall, there would be less conflict because the burden of child-rearing and care would be lessened.

Socioeconomic status (SES) is another moderator variable that affects marital conflict and satisfaction. Twenge et al. (2003) report that parents of higher SES, as well as the cohort of parents from the newer generation, reported greater marital dissatisfaction. The authors suggest that these findings may be explained using two models: role conflict model and restriction of freedom models. It may be that greater emphasis that is put on autonomy (Frum 2000), as well as an increase in the choice of activities that can be restricted when one becomes a parent, that contribute to greater dissatisfaction in marriage. The role that each sex typically takes on when it comes to parental investment applies also. With a greater shift in women entering the workforce now, married/partnered women of higher SES may be experiencing greater dissatisfaction than those married/partnered women of lower SES or married women of previous generations because the transition to parenthood may be more pronounced. Also, with more women working now, additional conflicts may arise because women have less time to devote to child-rearing and may need additional support from the child’s father.

Sex After the First Child
A common feature throughout the human population is a decline in sexual intercourse (Brewis and Meyer 2005). Before the birth of the child, women’s sexual interest and activity declines during the first trimester and continues to decrease into the third trimester (von Sydow 1999). Additionally, after the child is born, sexual interest is usually lower than normal for several months. Furthermore, research on women’s sexual interest indicates that they have less of a desire to have sex after having children (Brewis and Meyer 2005; Abdool et al. 2009; Escasa-Dorne et al. 2013). Men’s sexuality also shifts during the TTP. Although they do have a satisfying sex life, men’s sex drive is more inconsistent after the first child is born (Gray et al. 2015). This decreased libido on the part of men can be due to a decrease in testosterone since men’s testosterone goes down after they have a child (Gray et al. 2002). Since men and women, respectively, are less interested in sex after a child is born and sexuality in personal relationships is the result of an underlying motivation to maximize the transmission of genes to succeeding generations (Sprecher and Cate 2004), conflicts can arise regarding the amount of sex desired. Long et al. (1996) report that sexual conflict is negatively related to relationship satisfaction.

Infidelity and Jealousy
Two common types of infidelity that occur in relationships are sexual and emotional infidelity. Sexual infidelity involves having sex with someone other than your primary partner, while emotional infidelity involves falling in love or diverting resources such as time investment, attention, and emotional support to someone other than the primary partner (Shackelford et al. 2004; Shackelford and Buss 1997). While both types of infidelity can be distressing, a sex
difference emerges for reactions to infidelity dependent upon the type of infidelity committed. For men, if a woman is adulterous, it threatens his paternity certainty and opens the possibility of him being cuckolded into raising offspring that would not contribute to furthering his genetic line. This potential risk causes men to be more upset by sexual infidelity compared to emotional infidelity (Buss et al. 1992).

For women, a male partner who commits emotional infidelity signals a loss of investment in the couple’s offspring since some of the man’s time and resources are diverted to another woman and possibly to this other woman’s offspring. Thus, women are more upset by a partner’s commission of emotional infidelity. So, the jealousy each sex experiences most is dependent on the type of infidelity their partner commits (Wiederman and Kendall 1999). This differential jealousy adaptation helps to ensure one’s own fitness (Bendixen et al. 2015).

Researchers have discovered that during pregnancy, men are more likely to commit infidelity (Whisman et al. 2007). This may occur because there are reproductive advantages gained by having extra-pair copulations. If a man has multiple partners that he reproduces with, then his fitness is increased, and his genetic legacy is likely to continue. But, getting caught cheating on a partner can cause a high level of conflict, leading to mate expulsion, depending on the type of infidelity committed (Shackelford et al. 2002).

Since men are likely to commit infidelity when a woman is pregnant, conflict may arise in the couple such that women engage in more mate guarding. This would be adaptive since sexual infidelity on the part of her male partner could lead to a loss of investment in her offspring. Not surprisingly, Graham-Kevan and Archer (2009) report that pregnant women do engage in more mate guarding than nonpregnant women.

Conception may lead to conflict based in error management theory (EMT) because Buss (2001) reports that inferential biases are made about potential infidelity. From an EMT perspective, there are costs and benefits associated with overestimating the potential for sexual infidelity. So, in certain contexts, as in the case of a pregnant partner, it would be especially advantageous for a man to use heightened mate retention and mate-guarding tactics due to an overestimation that the partner would commit sexual infidelity. A man with a pregnant partner could experience reproductive losses if he underestimates his pregnant partner’s potential for sexual infidelity. Each of these situations could cause conflict among the couple because the mate-guarding tactics utilized by the man could become too controlling, or they could become not controlling enough to guard against a loss.

Child Custody and Child Support Conflict

Shackelford and Buss (1997) explain that marital satisfaction is an adaptive function because it allows the couple to realize it is time for them to find a different partner. If the couple decides to dissolve their relationship, and they have children, conflict can arise.

Since, the individuals are no longer living together, one of the individuals must help provide for the child. Consistent with parental investment theory (Trivers 1972), usually women are the ones in heterosexual relationships to gain custody of the child (Anderson 2011; Grall 2007). Men’s largest investment is financial which can lead to conflict after relationship dissolution.

In 2011 the US Census Bureau estimated that $37.9 billion dollars in child support was owed during the year of 2011, and 53.4% were single mothers (U.S. Census Bureau 2013). This statistics suggests that men are being forced to pay their ex-wives money to help provide for their child. Research speculates that although it may be advantageous for men to invest in their child, even if they are not living with them, it may also benefit them in not supporting the child (Shackelford et al. 2005). Men may refuse or want to reduce their payments of child support, because if they are giving money to an ex-partner they do not have 100% certainty that the money is going to their offspring and not to their ex-partner or their ex-partner’s new partner. If this occurs, then the man is ultimately decreasing his fitness
by giving up resources to an individual that is not his mate. A man may also want to reduce or not pay his child support if he has a new partner, since women tend to prefer men who are good financial providers (Buss 1989). Men may want to divert funds away from their child support and use those funds to attract a new mate, which will ultimately increase his fitness. This can create conflict among the man and the mother of his child requesting the child support. The aforementioned research shows that evolutionary theory can explain sexual conflict after conception occurs.

References


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